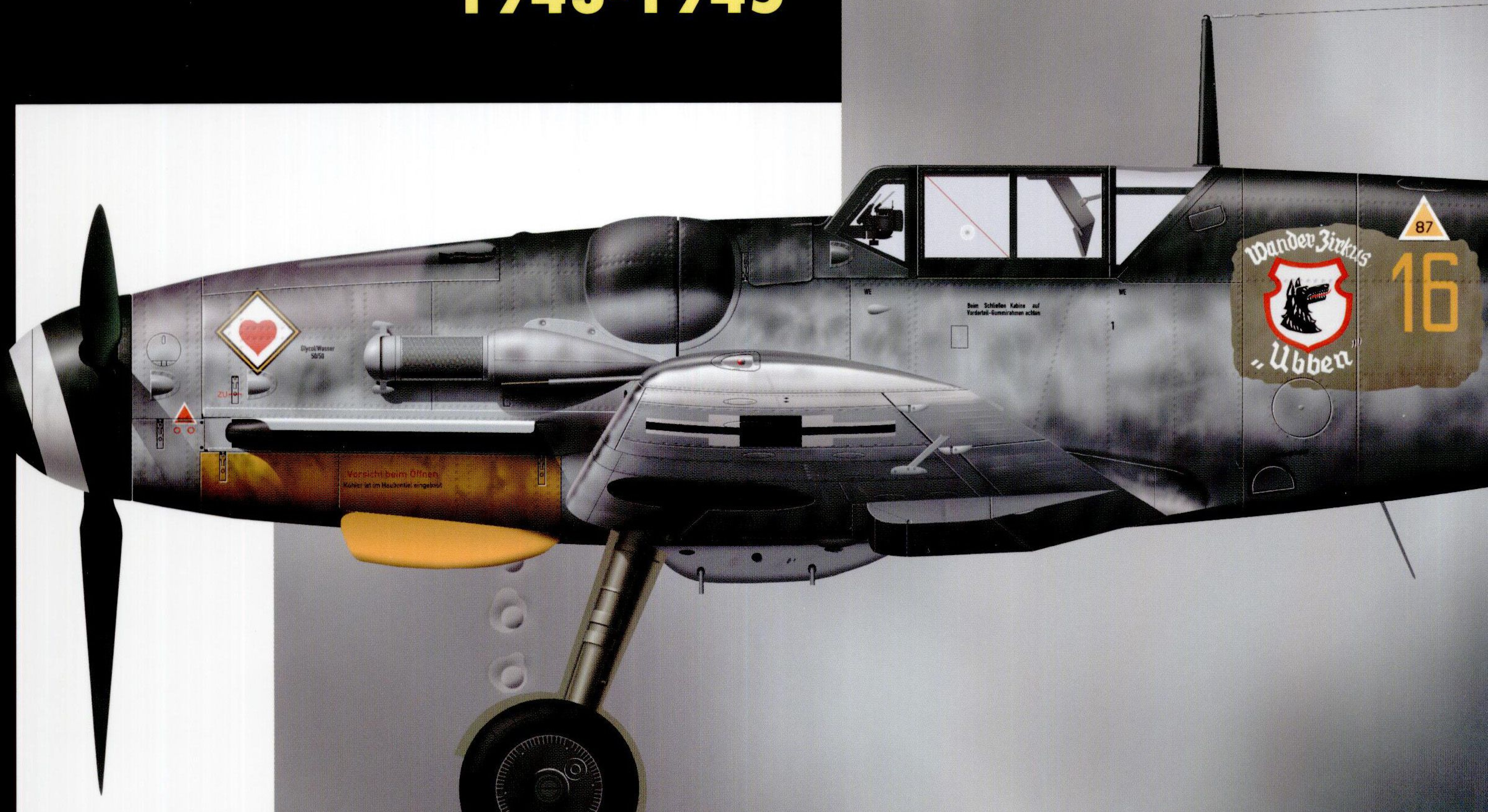
LUFTWAFFE COLOURS
Volume Four Section 4

JAGDWAFFE

Jean-Louis Roba
& Martin Pegg

THE MEDITERRANEAN

1943-1945


87
Wander Zirkus
16
„Ubben"

SICILY AND ITALY

1943
1945

"A Thunderbolt sits on my tail and, despite a speed of 750 km/h, I can't get away. I take hits in the starboard wing and the [WGr.21] tube is shot away. The Yank pulls by me, close to. As he passes, his tracer flits by me.

We land between the bomb craters. From my Staffel, three other machines have bullet damage. Gefreiter Scherer has shrapnel in the left side of his chest. Uffz. Schmitt was killed on the ground after landing. Niederhagen fails to return from operations, likewise a Fähnrich from 1. Staffel.

The Gruppe has scored a total of eight victories. Eight men baled out of Meschke's bomber. From another machine eight men jumped without parachutes. Three machines went down at the same time, on fire."

Extract from the diary of Hptm. Armin Köhler, Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 77, dated 30 January 1944

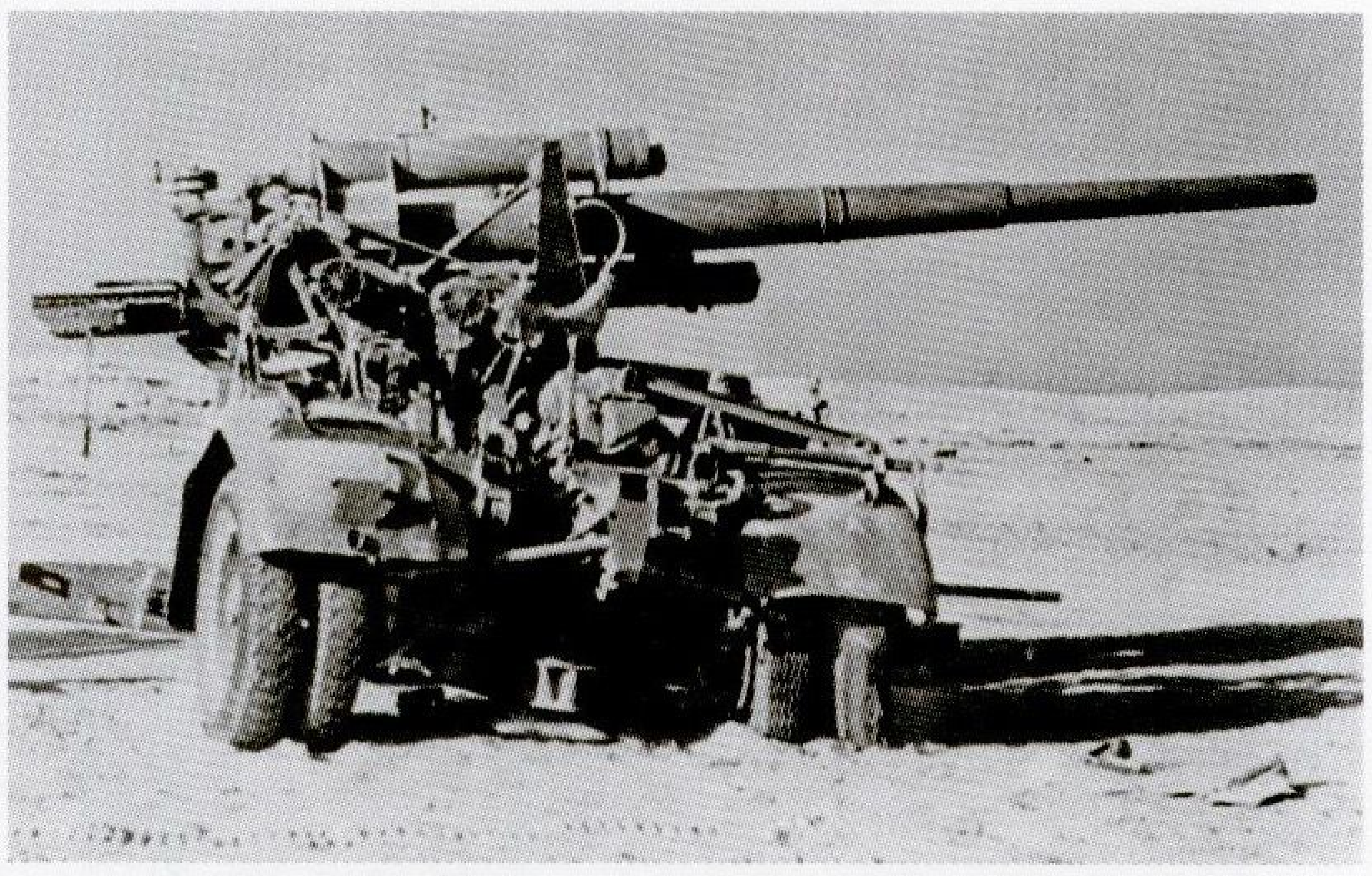
"I could see the omens of the war's end almost every day in the blue southern sky when the bombers of the American Fifteenth Air Force crossed the Alps from their Italian bases to attack German industrial targets."

Albert Speer, Reich Armaments Minister

May 1943-May 1945

Before the Storm

On 12 May 1943, resistance in the last Axis-held area in Tunisia collapsed and more than 170,000 German and Italian troops laid down their arms. The next day, a final surrender was agreed with the Italian Field Marshal Giovanni Messe, the supreme commander, and all organised resistance by Axis forces in North Africa ceased. Following on from the loss of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad in January, the surrender in Tunisia was a serious reverse for the Axis.



ABOVE: An example of the German 8.8 cm dual-purpose very high-velocity gun found damaged and abandoned in Tunisia. This weapon, originally intended for anti-aircraft purposes, was equally effective against tanks and other ground targets.

As Allied troops moved in to occupy the areas previously held by the Germans, they witnessed for the first time the spectacle of large numbers of German troops giving themselves up. Some merely sat beside the roads, while others drove or marched towards Tunis in long dusty columns. Burning vehicles and abandoned 8.8 cm guns, some destroyed, others complete, lay abandoned along the roadway. Some German units which had no petrol to run their vehicles wrecked them or set them on fire to prevent them falling into Allied hands. Others drove themselves into captivity in whatever transport was available and Allied troops sometimes encountered columns of German lorries driving in the opposite direction, together with the occasional staff car or half-track troop carrier.

ABOVE: After the Axis surrender in Tunisia, the Allies claimed to have taken more than 250,000 prisoners, but latest research suggests that a total of 170,000, of whom at least 100,000 were German, may be a more accurate figure. This group of captives, led by a British soldier of First Army, belonged to the German 334. Artillery Regiment.

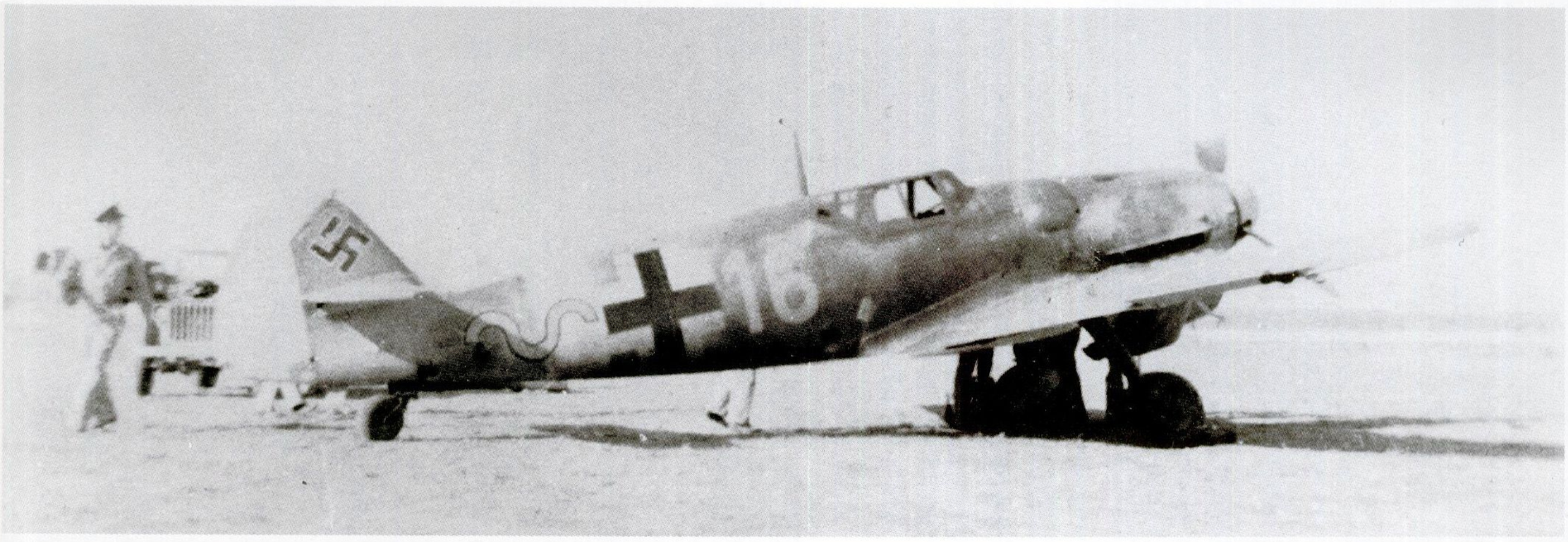
In addition to Axis motor transport, artillery, armoured vehicles and other material, a large number of aircraft was seized. Indeed, Allied Air Intelligence later reported that since the opening of the El Alamein offensive in November, a total of around 2,000 German and Italian aircraft had been captured, many of them in good condition. Over 600 of these were found in Tunisia even though, shortly before the final capitulation, orders had been issued for all *Luftwaffe* flying units to be withdrawn. During the German evacuation, small groups of aircraft flew out from the remaining unoccupied Tunisian airfields, most landing in Sicily. The last German fighters, probably of JG 77, remained until the end and did not fly out until a few hours before the Axis capitulation.

With the fall of Tunisia, the Allies were in possession of air bases along the whole coastline of North Africa, except for Spanish Morocco, from which they could at any time mount air attacks on Axis-held Europe. The Americans at this time preferred to concentrate their next assault on the coast of France, but since this was not possible in 1943, they were persuaded by the British that a landing in Sicily and Italy from North Africa would bring about the disintegration of the Axis. Thus, by using Tunisia as a springboard, the Allies planned to eliminate Italy from the war and, even before the final surrender in North Africa, their bombers had already begun attacking targets in Sicily and mainland Italy.

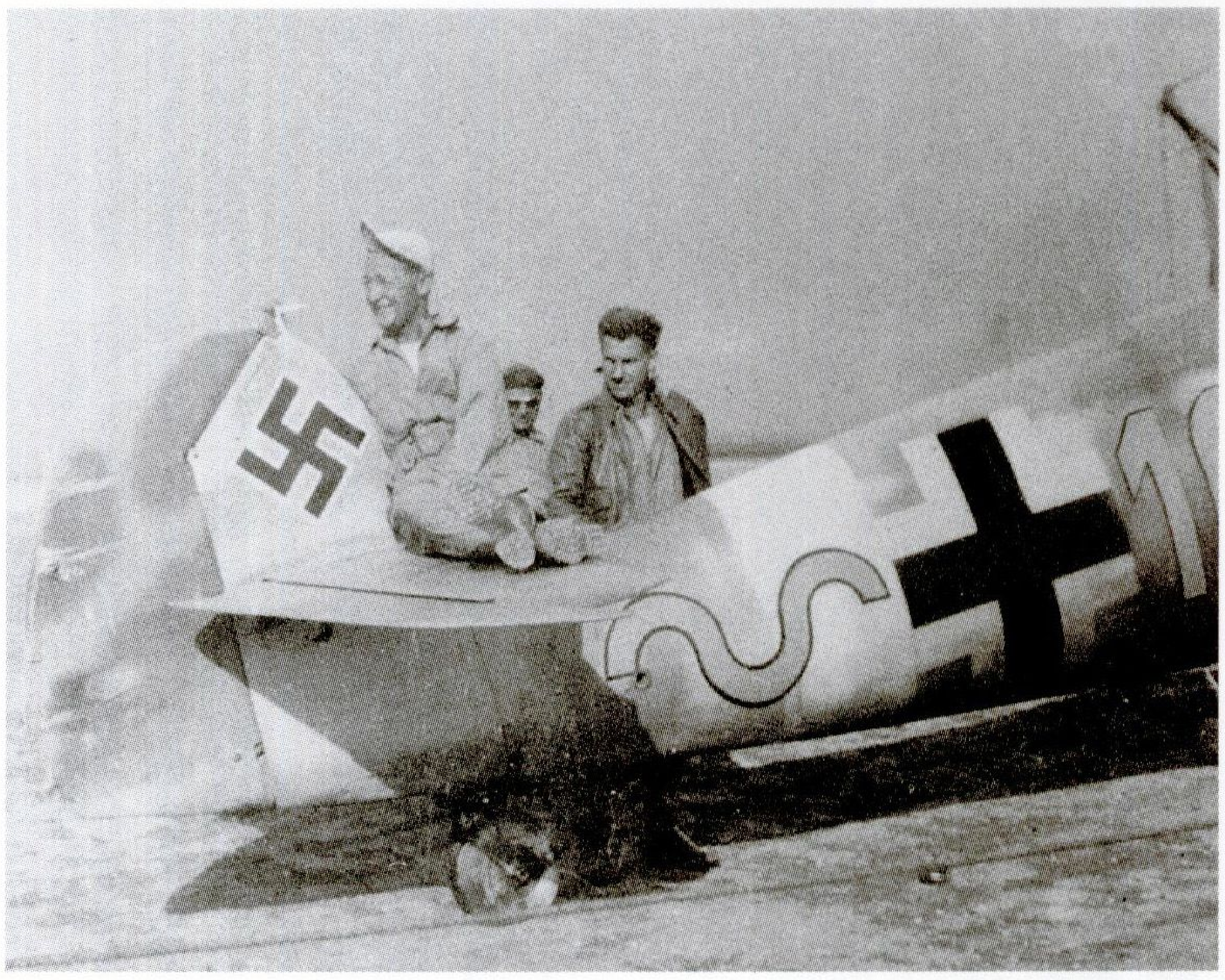
With the *Regia Aeronautica* almost totally destroyed, responsibility for the defence of Sicily was entrusted to the German day fighters which had rapidly to occupy the obsolete Sicilian airfields before the next Allied offensive in the Mediterranean. However, the period of respite available to the *Luftwaffe* to reorganise was short and conditions in Sicily were so unfavourable that all personnel, including *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, the senior area commander, believed that any invasion of Sicily could not be held off for long. Too much important material and too many members of the ground personnel had been left behind in Tunisia, radar detection and communications were poor, the airfields on Sicily were largely unprepared and lacked facilities for servicing and repairs, and the *Luftwaffe* personnel were exhausted and demoralised. In addition, while the majority of the *Regia Aeronautica* pilots were certainly true to the Germans, it was felt that the Italian ground troops would not resist for any length of time. The Italian officer corps in particular was regarded with suspicion, for it was realised that many lacked the will to fight and that some older officers who wished to see their country out of the war were already conspiring with their King against Mussolini.

Now that Italy was in the front line, Mussolini tried, without success, to persuade the *Führer* to concentrate on the defence of the Mediterranean, but the Germans were preoccupied with planning for Operation *'Zitadelle'*, a major summer offensive in southern Russia, and had few troops to spare to defend Italy. Hitler therefore informed

BELOW: The Regia Aeronautica lost a large number of aircraft in North Africa. This photograph shows a central collection point for damaged and scrap Italian aircraft after its capture by the Allies, but many more machines were found in fields or in other remote areas.

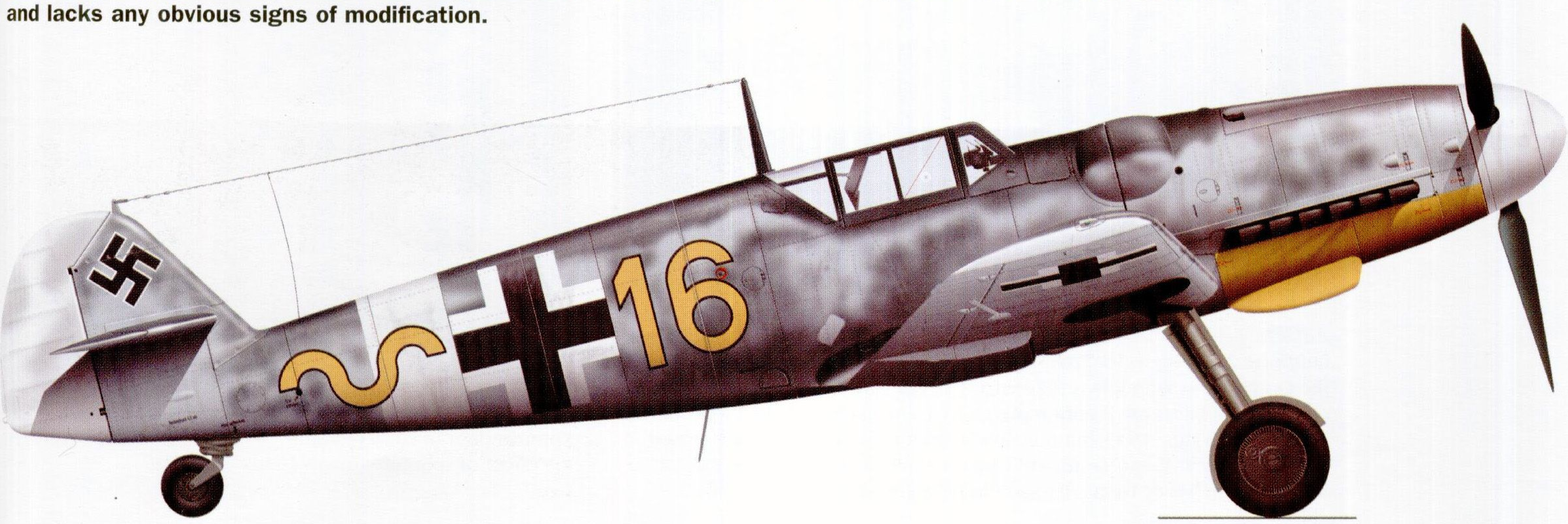


ABOVE AND RIGHT: One of the aircraft left behind after the Germans left Tunisia was this Bf 109 G-6, 'Yellow 16', W.Nr. 16531, which had flown with 9./JG 27. On 6 May, just two days before the final surrender, this aircraft was damaged by enemy action at Tunis, and although the pilot, Uffz. Gerhard Gorrisch, was unhurt, the machine was sufficiently damaged to prevent it being flown out to Sicily or southern Italy and was therefore declared a write-off. Interestingly, this aircraft was later seen with wings removed at Montesquieu in Algeria, and although no positive proof exists, this may be the G-6 which arrived in the UK in February 1944 and later flew with the British serial VX 101. Note how the abrasive action of the North African dust and sand has scoured the rear of the propeller blades almost entirely clean of their original dark green paint.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Yellow 16', W.Nr. 16531, of 9./JG 27, Tunis, May 1943

Perhaps because the landscape in Tunisia was markedly different from the desert, or perhaps because the outcome of the war in North Africa was already a foregone conclusion, it seems that Bf 109s being delivered to units in the theatre in mid-1943 no longer had a tan factory finish and were received in RLM 74/75/76 grey colours, any modifications being left to individual units. Although the sunlight in the accompanying photographs gives the appearance of a lighter scheme, this aircraft is, however, finished in the standard greys and lacks any obvious signs of modification.



ABOVE: An attentive audience of German and Italian pilots listen with interest as Major Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn, the Kommodore of JG 53, employs classic pilot's hand gestures to describe an aerial engagement. Von Maltzahn has been described as one of the most friendly and popular senior officers in the Luftwaffe. His calm, assured manner, his care for his subordinates and his ability to listen to their opinions, regardless of their rank, endeared him to his men.

ABOVE: Generalleutnant Theodor Osterkamp was appointed Jafü Sizilien on 5 April 1943 and held this position until replaced by Galland on 15 June. This earlier photograph shows Osterkamp, who had flown as a pilot in the First World War, at Trapani in 1942.

Mussolini that while the prospect of the Allies opening a second front somewhere on Italian territory was a distinct possibility and that he expected the Italians to put up a good performance in the defence of their own country, he was well aware of the state of Italian morale and believed that rather than fight, even in defence of their own soil, they would throw away their arms and go over to the Allies en masse.

While most *Luftwaffe* aircraft had been diverted to the mainland following the fall of North Africa, a substantial force of fighters remained in Sicily, where the main *Luftwaffe* fighter formation was JG 53 under *Major* Günther *Freiherr* von Maltzahn with three *Gruppen*: *Major* Friedrich-Karl Müller's I./JG 53 at Catania, *Major* Gerhard Michalski's II./JG 53 at Comiso, and *Major* Franz Götz's III./JG 53 at Sciacca. In addition to the defence of Sicily, JG 53's Bf 109s also operated over Malta, sometimes escorting the Fw 190 fighter-bombers of SKG 10 or the reconnaissance Bf 109s of 2.(*H*)/14. These *Gruppen* of JG 53 were reinforced by II./JG 27 under *Hptm.* Werner Schroer at Trapani.

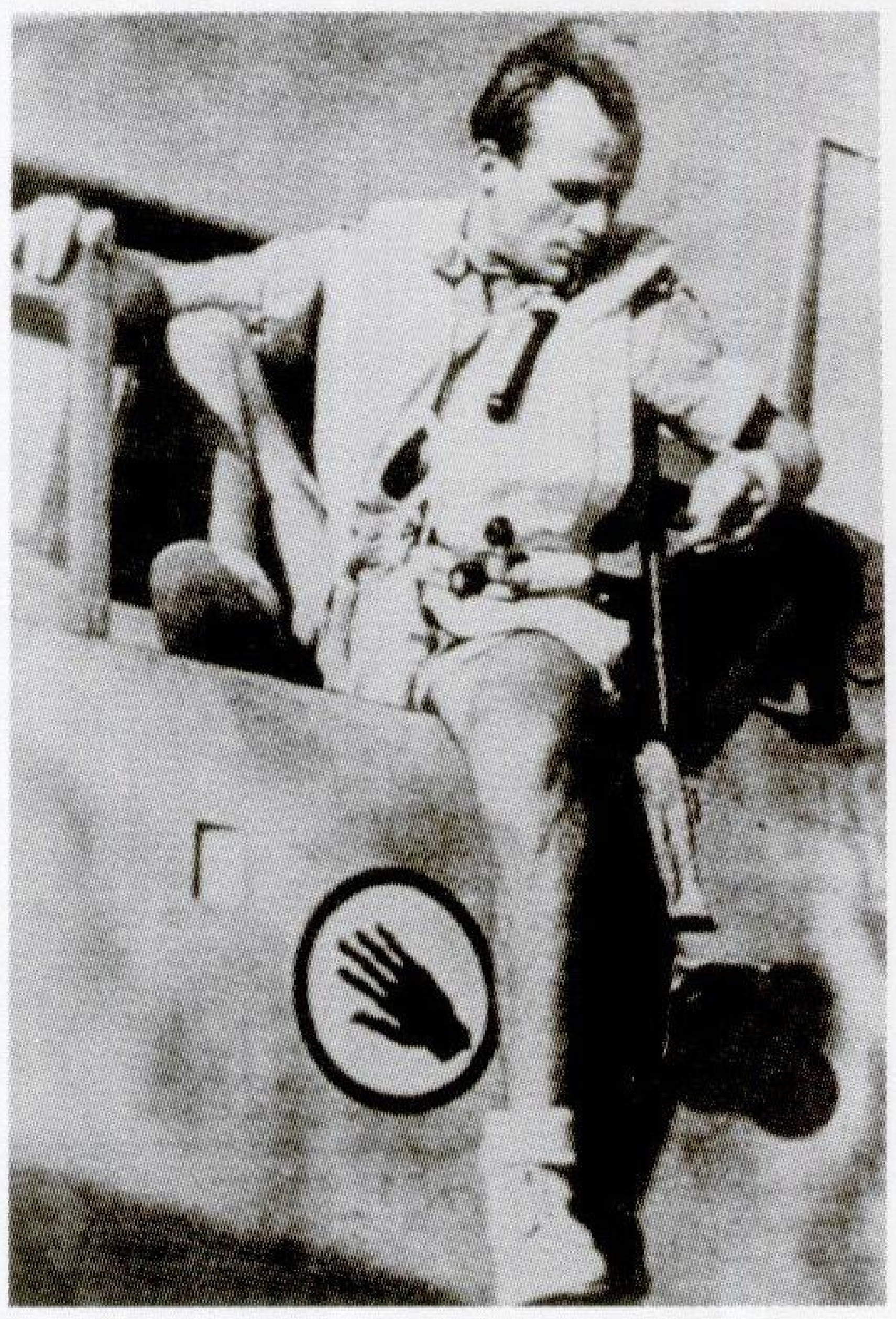
Another *Geschwader* which had fought in Tunisia was JG 77, but this was more widely separated, with *Major* Heinz Bär's I./JG 77 and *Major* Siegfried Freytag's II./JG 77 being based for a few weeks on the large aerodromes at Foggia in southern Italy before departing for Germany where they were to rest and refit. III./JG 77 under *Major* Kurt Ubben was also based at Foggia for about two weeks while it was brought up to strength, partly by receiving aircraft from JG 53, before being assigned to the defence of Sardinia where it joined II./JG 51, probably at that time under the temporary leadership of *Oblt.* Karl Rammelt.

In the relatively quieter eastern Mediterranean, defence was provided by the newly-created IV./JG 27 which was stationed at Kalamaki, near Athens, under *Hptm.* Rudolf Sinner, JG 27 thus becoming one of the first German *Jagdgeschwader* to be reinforced by the creation of a fourth *Gruppe*. The raising of IV./JG 27 had begun in mid-May 1943 when 8./JG 27 was ordered to move from Italy to Greece and was redesigned 12./JG 27. Two other *Staffeln*, the 10. and 11./JG 27, were then formed and, in order to restore III./JG 27 to its full establishment, a new 8./JG 27 was raised under *Oblt.* Wolf Ettel. This pilot had previously flown exclusively

LEFT: Some well-known pilots of JG 77 photographed at Foggia in May 1943. From left to right: Hptm. Kurt Ubben, the Kommandeur of III./JG 77, Johannes Steinhoff – the Kommodore – and Oblt. Hölzle of Stab III./JG 77. Shortly after this picture was taken, III./JG 77 moved to Sardinia.

ABOVE: Feldmarshall Albert Kesselring, C-in-C South and commander of Luftflotte 2, visiting I./JG 77 at Chinisia on 11 May 1943, a few days before the Gruppe was withdrawn to Germany to rest and refit. Kesselring retained command of Luftflotte 2 until replaced by Generalfeldmarschall Wolfram von Richthofen in June 1943, but remained in command of all German Armed Forces in Italy as C-in-C South until March 1945. On the far left is the Kommandeur, Major Heinz Bär, soon to be relieved of his command.

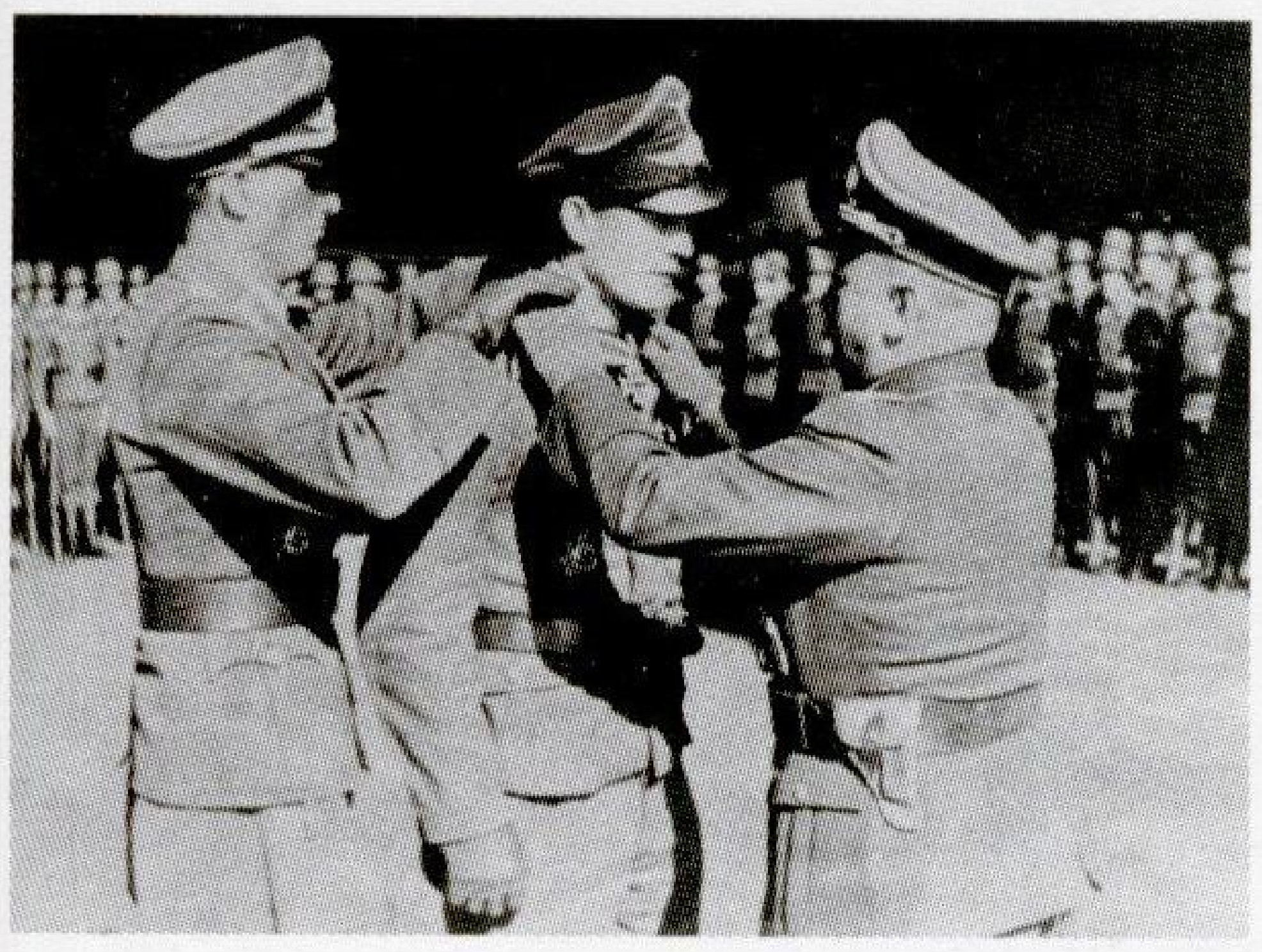
ABOVE: Hptm. Kurt Ubben, the Kommandeur of III./JG 77, showing the effect of splinter wounds to his face.



ABOVE: Uffz. Oskar Wolf in the cockpit of a Bf 109 F of 8./JG 27 showing the Staffel's black hand emblem, first introduced in June 1943.

with 4./JG 3 since the spring of 1942 and had been credited with 120 victories in Russia. Ettel had been awarded the *Ritterkreuz* on 1 June 1943 in recognition of his victories and such other actions as when, on 11 May 1943, after being shot down in no man's land, he not only returned to his own lines but led a patrol to the site of his crashed Bf 109 the following night in order to retrieve important components. Flying from Kalamaki and also from Larissa and Maleme in Crete, IV./JG 27 covered all the Aegean Sea. Meanwhile, III./JG 27 under *Hptm.* Ernst Düllberg, was in the process of replacing its Bf 109 Fs with new 'Gustavs' and, at the end of June, moved from the toe of Italy to Argos in Greece.

In this brief period of relative quiet, many moves in personnel occurred. Among the better known was *Ofw.* Alexander Preinfalk, a *Ritterkreuzträger* of 5./JG 77 credited with 71 *Luftsiege,* who was ordered to southern France as an instructor with 1./EJG *Süd.* However, returning to III./JG 77 in Sardinia was another *Ritterkreuzträger, Ofw.* Herbert Kaiser[1] who had left III./JG 77 when the unit was in Libya, to serve as an instructor with EJG *Süd.* His return, however, was apparently marred by a poor relationship with his *Kommandeur, Hptm.* Kurt Ubben, and a few weeks later, Kaiser transferred to 3./JG 77.



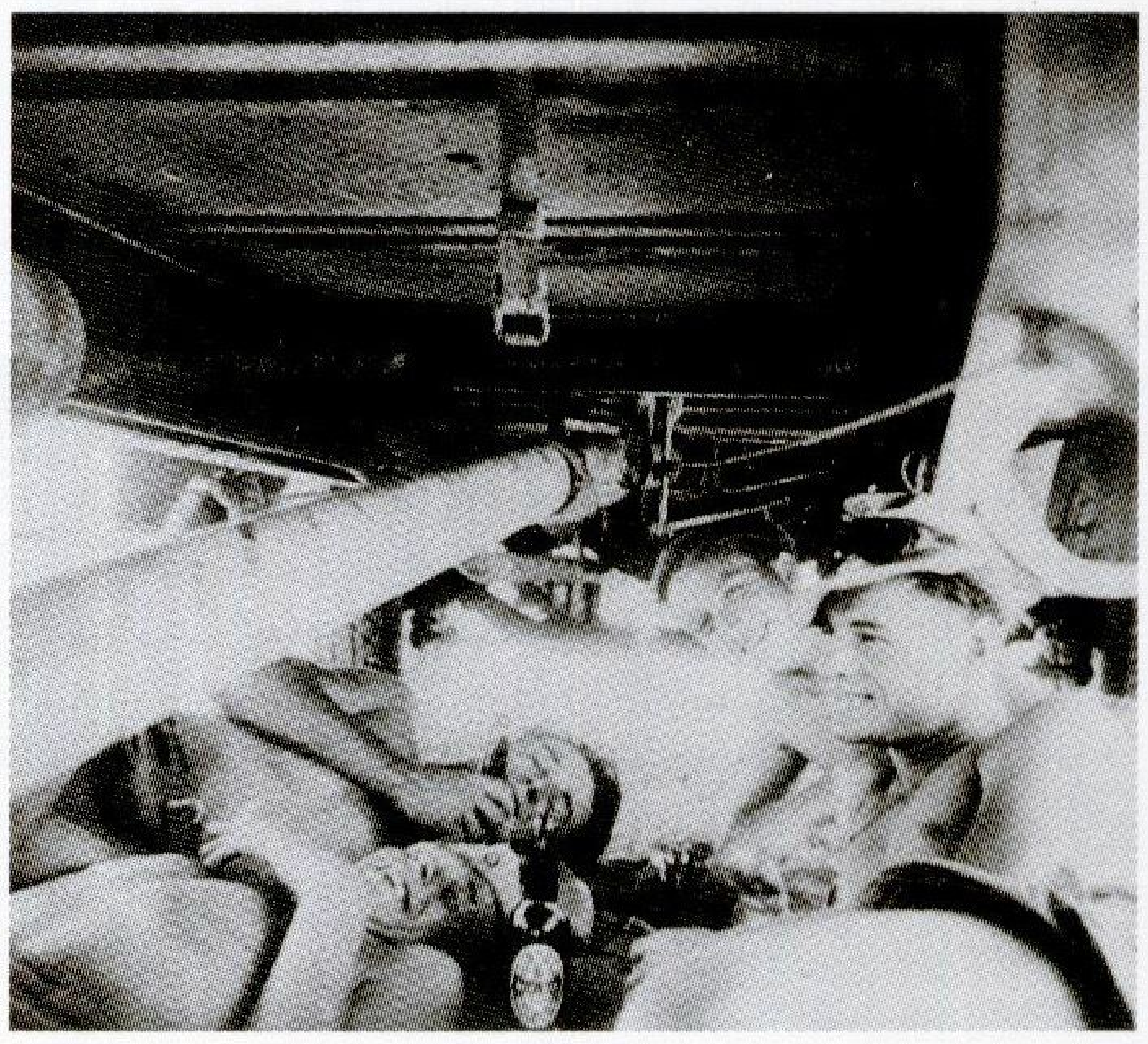
ABOVE: Ofw. Herbert Kaiser receiving the Ritterkreuz at Marseilles airfield on 14 March 1943. At that time Kaiser, totally exhausted, had 53 victories and was a flying instructor with EJG Süd, having left III./JG 77 in Africa. Shortly after this photograph was taken, Kaiser returned to front-line duties and rejoined III./JG 77 in Sardinia before transferring to I./JG 77 at his own request following difficulties with his Gruppenkommandeur, Kurt Ubben. He later flew with JG 1 and JV 44. The officer on the right is Obstlt. Alfred Müller, the commanding officer of EJG Süd, and a pilot who had flown with a Jasta in the First World War. In 1940, "Papa" Müller flew with 4./JG 3 and was later transferred to various second line units. At the end of 1943 EJG Süd organised small operational units to defend the Côte d'Azur – Provence area of France.

Another successful pilot and future Knight's Cross holder was *Hptm.* Jürgen Harder, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 53, then with 39 victories. When the last of his brothers was killed while serving with an artillery unit in Russia, Jürgen, being the last son in his family, received a *Flugverbot*, a ban on flying. He therefore left the unit a little later and remained grounded, subsequently joining the *Stab* of II. *Fliegerkorps.* His successor as leader of 7./JG 53 was another future *Ritterkreuzträger, Oblt.* Franz Barten, who had had a long career, originally flying with 2./JG 77 in 1939 before joining the newly created IV./JG 51. He came to the Mediterranean theatre with 44 *Abschüsse*, of which 39 were Soviet aircraft.

The Italian *Regia Aeronautica* was also the subject of some reorganisation and received reinforcements on 22 May when II./JG 53 handed over 23 of its Bf 109 G-4 and G-6 aircraft to III° *Gruppo Autonomo CT.* Although these aircraft were worn out, they were nevertheless a welcome addition to the depleted Italian Air Force.

By the end of May, the Allied air forces had repaired the relatively good airfields in North Africa, had regrouped, and were ready to turn their entire attention to the Axis airfields in Sicily and southern Italy as the initial softening up of targets began. In this, the Allies were aided by the Ultra decrypts of *Luftwaffe* messages that provided a very good picture of the enemy's dispositions and were a valuable aid to the selection of targets.

During one particular attack on 31 May, Foggia was severely bombed, and among the units in action that day was II./JG 51 which, although it suffered four losses – two in accidents and two in action – claimed nine victories, some of these being credited to the already successful pilots *Oblt.* Rammelt and *Ofw.* Otto Schultz, both of 4./JG 51, and *Oblt.* Herbert Puschmann of 6./JG 51. Also involved



FAR LEFT AND LEFT: The defence of Sicily presented the Luftwaffe with a number of problems, not the least of which was the poor condition of the airfields. Here, (FAR LEFT) members of Stab/JG 77 are working on improving the Feldflugplatz at Salemi, an advanced airfield which, even when finished, would have only minor or limited servicing facilities. Finding shade was evidently a problem for these men (LEFT) who, having armed themselves with some bottles of beer, are sheltering under their lorry from the sun.

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[1] Herbert Kaiser had the surname Höhne until 1942 when he changed it for family reasons. A number of Kaiser's earlier claims are therefore recorded under his original name of Höhne.

on 31 May was II./JG 27 which was very active from its Sicilian airfield. Losing only one pilot killed in action and two wounded, the *Gruppe's* pilots claimed 32 *Abschüsse*, half of them bombers. Six of these claims, the majority of them B-17s, were attributed to its *Kommandeur*, *Hptm*. Werner Schroer, while *Lt.* Willy Kientsch of 6./JG 27 was credited with five and *Hptm*. Ernst Börngen of 5./JG 27 claimed four *Abschüsse*, three of these being bombers. Also operating from Sicily was the *Kommodore* of JG 27, *Major* Gustav Rödel, who claimed to have shot down another five of the enemy aircraft.[2]

Less successful was JG 53 which, in the period between the 12th and 31st, lost four of its pilots killed in action and 13 aircraft destroyed plus seven machines severely damaged in a bombing raid on Sciacca on 21 May. In this same period, the three *Gruppen* of JG 53 claimed 25 *Luftsiege* of which three were credited to *Oblt*. Hans Röhrig, five to *Oblt*. Franz Schiess and two to the *Kommandeur* of I./JG 53, *Major* Friedrich-Karl Müller.

It is interesting to note that, as in North Africa, approximately 33 per cent of the victories claimed in May were bombers, the rest being fighters or Bristol Beaufighters. This is a tribute to the effectiveness of the Allied escort fighters who defended the four-engined bombers so successfully that they were rarely shot down by the German day fighters, most Allied four-engined bomber losses being due to the extremely efficient German anti-aircraft batteries. In an attempt to improve this ratio, some aircraft from JG 53, and later also of III./JG 77, were for a while equipped with bombs which, as already tested in the West by JG 1, were dropped on the box formations of American bombers. The Allied escort fighters, however, were too numerous for these tactics to succeed and such attacks were eventually abandoned.

On 1 June, III./JG 77 left the Italian mainland and moved to Sardinia where the *Gruppe* was to defend the island and also provide escort for the reconnaissance aircraft of 4.(*H*)/12 flying to the coast of North Africa. These reconnaissance missions, carried out by a *Rotte* consisting of a reconnaissance Bf 109 and one Bf 109 fighter, were made difficult by the unreliability of the aircraft engines which had invariably been damaged by sand and heat, and some aircraft were forced to ditch during the long flight to Africa and back. Another serious danger to these flights were the US P-38s patrolling along the Moroccan coast and which shot down at least two of III./JG 77's machines. Interestingly, when the pilot of one of these aircraft was captured and interrogated, he stated that he belonged to 4.(*H*)/12. When asked why the wreckage of his aircraft carried the *'Herz As'* badge of JG 77, he explained that he had been forced to fly an aircraft from that unit as there were not enough reconnaissance aircraft available in the area.

On 7 June, *Hptm*. Karl Rammelt officially took command of II./JG 51 but, on the same day, a great offensive by Allied aircraft began against the island of Pantelleria. The air battles in the days which followed resulted in heavy losses for the defending German and Italian fighters and, of the 14 pilots of II./JG 27 killed in action up until 18 June, nine fell on 10 June in the vicinity of Pantelleria. Reinforcements arrived on 8 June when I./JG 77 landed at Sciacca in Sicily after being re-equipped in the *Reich*. However, the opposing forces were overwhelming and Pantelleria fell on 11 June, so giving the Allies their first foothold in Europe. On the 13th, *Stab*/JG 77 arrived in Sicily but encountered severe Allied bombing and when Comiso was attacked on the 17th, many units had to move, either to other airfields in Sicily or to mainland Italy.

RIGHT: Even before the Allied occupation of Tunisia had been completed, the Italian island of Pantelleria, situated about 60 miles from the Sicilian coast and 45 miles from Cap Bon, was repeatedly subjected to an ever-intensifying aerial and naval bombardment. Capture of the island by the Allies would provide a useful base for fighter aircraft and a harbour for use by light naval forces, but since it was known to be heavily armed and had a substantial garrison, it was thought that a landing might prove costly. It was therefore decided that the garrison should be induced to surrender by a concentrated bombardment and blockade. After 13 days of almost continuous naval and air bombardment during which, on one particular day, the 31 square mile island was subjected to 12 air raids, the Italian commander on Pantelleria, Admiral Gino Pavesi, surrendered the island without a fight on 11 June 1943. This photograph of wrecked German and Italian aircraft was taken the following day.

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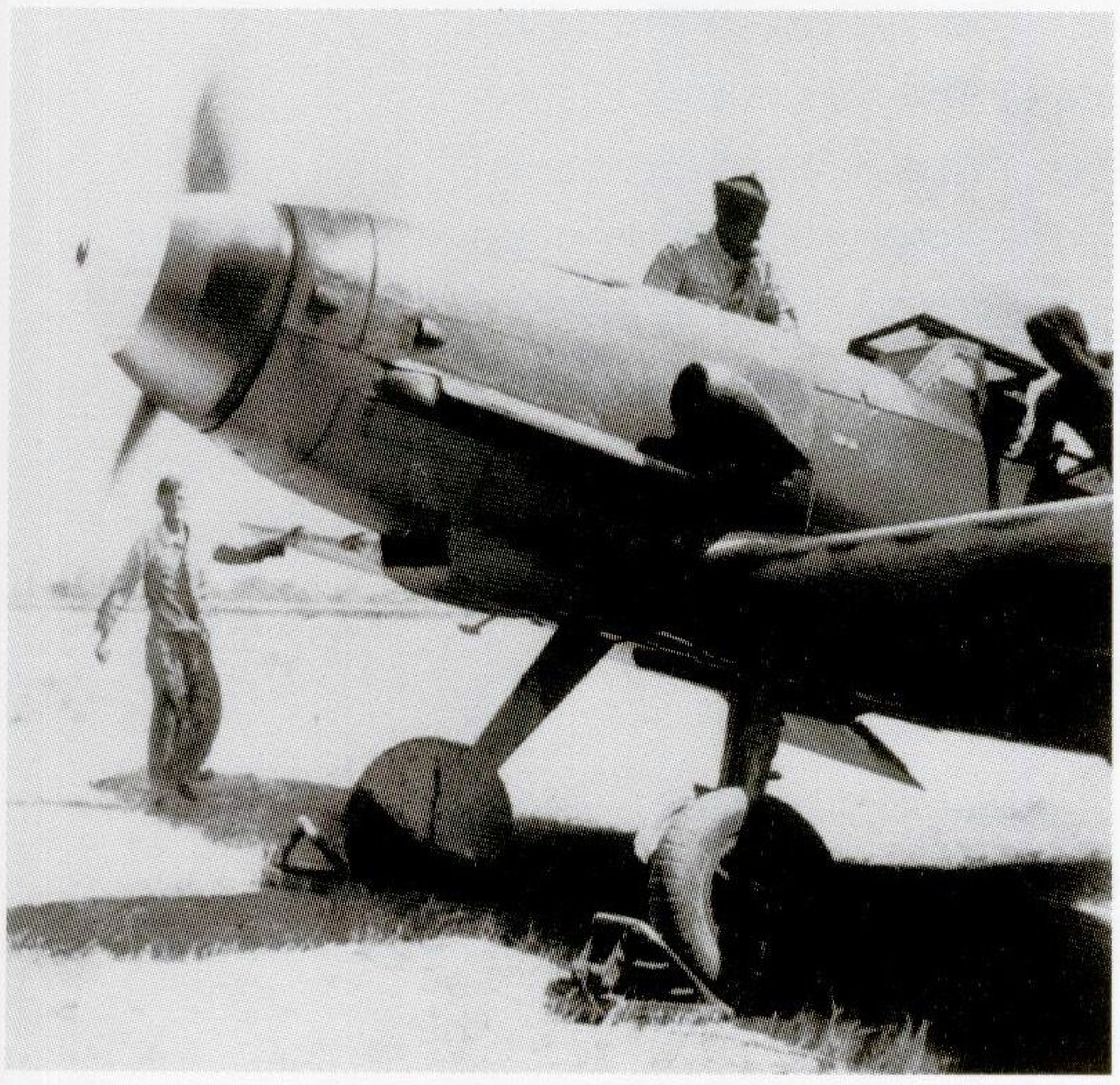
[2] All victories mentioned in the text, whether claimed or confirmed, should be viewed with caution as overclaiming by both Axis and Allied personnel was a frequent occurrence.



ABOVE: An early Bf 109 G of II./JG 77 running-up its engine in Italy in 1943.

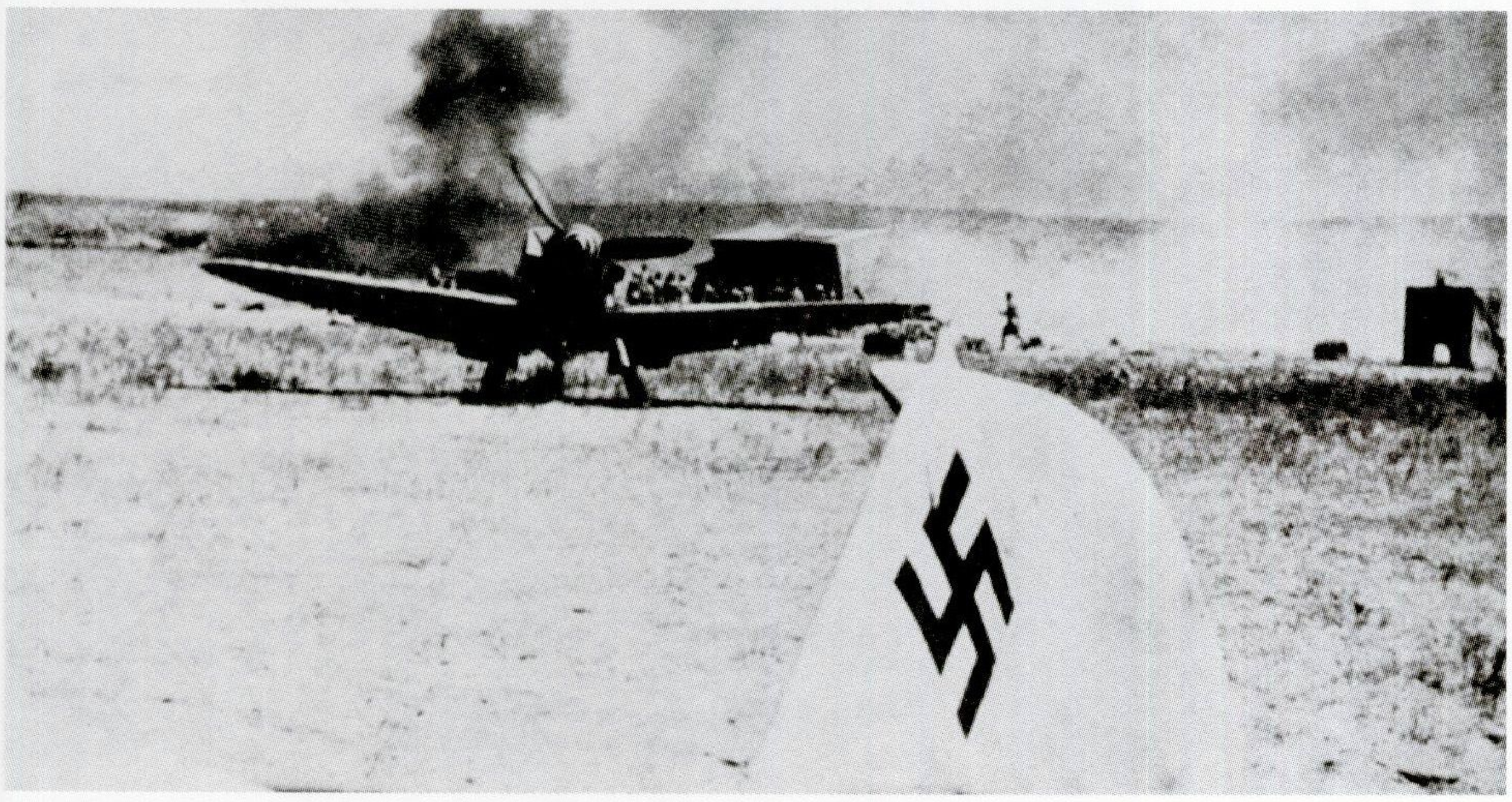
Sardinia did not escape Allied bombing either, and on 18 June a great air battle occurred over or near the island during which III./JG 77 claimed six *Luftsiege* for no losses. The following day, with the arrival in Sicily of II./JG 77, the whole of JG 77 was again concentrated in the one area, but the pressure on Sicily was heavy and on the 20th, II./JG 27 left for Lecce, in the heel of Italy. At the same time, III./JG 53 transferred from Sciacca, where the airfield was overcrowded with the aircraft of I./JG 77, to Torazzo, another Sicilian airfield near Catania. On the 21st, the *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 53, *Oblt.* Franz Schiess, received the *Ritterkreuz* for his 55 *Luftsiege* and temporarily left the unit for a period of well-earned leave.

Meanwhile, *Reichsmarschall* Göring was growing increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of the fighter pilots in the central Mediterranean who were having an extremely difficult time and whose general morale was very low for several reasons. Firstly, they had lost confidence in their aircraft and no longer believed that they could get the better of whatever aircraft they met, particularly since, because of poor maintenance and replacement facilities, pilots were never sure if their engines would respond when extra speed was required or fail altogether. Although most pilots considered that the Spitfire IX, then being encountered in increasing numbers, was less manoeuvrable than the Bf 109 G, it was faster in level flight and in the climb and they preferred to engage it only when combat was unavoidable. The American P-38 Lightning was also considered to be a first-class machine with, however, the one big disadvantage that it seemed to catch fire immediately it was hit.

Although the *Jagdflieger* were also being subjected to continual air raids, the one factor which brought morale down to a very low level was having to attack four-engined bombers. This was far from being a simple matter for, as the majority of pilots knew only too well, it was practically impossible to close safely to the range needed to shoot these down. All this was not understood by Göring who, on 11 June, had already sent a telegram to the Command Staff of *Luftflotte* 2 that read:

> *"All fighter pilots stationed in Italy are to be informed that they are the most pitiful bunch of fliers I have ever commanded. If by chance they happen to encounter the enemy, they allow themselves to be shot down without obtaining any successes in return. Until further notice I forbid any leave in order that I do not have to be ashamed of these miserable personalities in the homeland."*

Soon afterwards, Göring ordered *Generalmajor* Adolf Galland, the *General der Jagdflieger*, to the area, the latter arriving in Sicily on 22 June where he began personally to organise and take charge of its defence. He also tried to pass on the experience gained against bombers in the West which had shown that collision-course attacks sometimes broke up their formations so that



BELOW: In June 1943, the main weight of the Allied bombing attacks was directed against the airfields in Sicily, and this view of Catania under attack is believed to show aircraft of JG 53. Such attacks against Sicilian airfields continued until after the invasion of the island when airfields in mainland Italy became the main targets.

BELOW: The aftermath of a US air attack on an airfield in Sicily in May or June 1943. The aircraft in the foreground, 'White 4', belonged to II./JG 51 and had a white horizontal Gruppe bar ahead of the individual aircraft number on the fuselage. The upper and lower wingtips were white.

further attacks could be made to pick off any bombers damaged. Galland therefore urged his pilots to attack in large numbers, in close formation and to close to short range, but the pilots in Italy were unfamiliar with assembling and flying in large formations. Nor did they have any experience of approaching the bombers in this way when closing speeds left only a few seconds to line up correctly, aim and fire. In addition, the bombers were based only between 100 and 200 miles away so that the fighters had insufficient time properly to position themselves for the recommended head-on attacks before the bombers arrived over their target. Their task was made more difficult by poor communications and the fact that the bombers could approach or fly home from any direction and at any height. Moreover, if the bomber formations were headed for targets further north, they flew a dog-leg course to avoid the German defences and *Luftwaffe* fighters could only make contact, if at all, at the limit of their range.

There was therefore a marked reluctance to attack four-engined bombers while they were in formation and the best the *Jagdflieger* could do was make feinting attacks when the bombers were over their objective to cause them to aim badly. Even on the occasions when the German fighter pilots were in a favourable position, they were always aware that – unlike pilots operating over friendly territory in Germany or occupied Europe, whose chances of survival if shot down were good and who could expect to be quickly returned to their units – sorties from Sicily, Sardinia and southern Italy were almost entirely flown over water. Thus their old fear of the sea, which had first manifested itself during the Battle of Britain, was renewed, and they always had the fear at the back of their minds that if they were shot down or their engines failed, it would happen over the sea.

Galland, however, was too willing to obey the orders from higher authority and, ignoring the facts, acted very unreasonably and unfairly towards his fighter pilots, some of whom were formerly his close comrades. He also passed on Göring's unpleasant communications, one of which virtually compelled the fighter pilots to ensure they returned with at least one victory in each war flight or face court martial. This resulted from an operation on 25 June when 100 German fighters took off from Trapani but achieved only two confirmed kills. Given these unsatisfactory results, *Reichsmarschall* Göring demanded an explanation and sent a signal to all fighter pilots operating in Sicily and Italy which read:

> *"To the Fighter Leader Sicily. During the defensive action against the bombing attack on the Straits of Messina the fighter element failed in its task. One pilot from each of the fighter Gruppen taking part will be tried by court martial for cowardice in the face of the enemy."*

Instead of explaining to Göring that his pilots were doing their best under very difficult circumstances and in the face of overwhelming opposition, Galland turned on them and passed on this order. In the event, no punitive measures were taken, but Galland's actions did nothing to restore the pilots' confidence in the high command. They felt, with some justification, that the high command was so far from the front that it failed to appreciate that, given their circumstances and the Allies' obvious

RIGHT: In May 1943, the General der Jagdflieger, Generalmajor Adolf Galland, was personally entrusted with control of the fighter defence of Sicily and of restoring morale and efficiency, a job which, by his own admission, he did not relish. The forces at his disposal were small, airfield facilities were meagre and all the best ground equipment had been lost in Africa and not replaced. As well as controlling successively from Trapani, Comiso and Catania, Galland visited the fighter units under his control and discussed the situation with their Kommodore and other senior officers. It seems as if the visit was not a success since, while Galland tried to explain how, by using the tactics employed in the West, successes against the bombers could be obtained even against superior numbers, the leaders of the fighter units in Sicily could not adopt them, complaining that neither Galland nor his superiors in Germany fully understood that the situation in the Mediterranean differed greatly from that in the West. Galland, seen here during a visit to JG 53, then quoted the instance of a Jagdgeschwader which had recently arrived in the West from Russia and which shot down 22 four-engined bombers in its first encounter. Citing this as an example of the vulnerability of four-engined aircraft to determined attack, Galland ordered that future attacks were to be pressed home to 100 metres and that if, when four-engined aircraft were the targets, pilots landed without having shot one down or returned without strikes on their machine, they were to be arrested and charged with cowardice before the enemy. The result of this was that pilots, whether new or more experienced, attacked as ordered but seldom returned and were lost without any success being gained.

air superiority, it was unrealistic to expect the *Luftwaffe* to achieve the same successes as in the West. The result of the signal was to cause morale to sink even lower and there was widespread cynicism among the pilots.[3]

At the end of the month, IV./JG 3, arrived in the south of Italy. This *Gruppe* had been raised at the beginning of the month and was assigned a very successful pilot, *Major* Franz Beyer, formerly *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 3 with 80 victories, as *Kommandeur*. The *Gruppe* was partly equipped with Bf 109 G-6s, some of which were fitted with *Werferröhren* – launching tubes for firing 21 cm mortar shells – under the wings, and arrived at Leverano airfield in southern Italy on 30 June. Within its ranks were other such successful pilots as *Oblt.* Franz Daspelgruber, the *Staffelkapitän* of 10./JG 3 with 45 victories, *Lt.* Otto Wessling, a *Ritterkreuzträger* with 62 *Abschüsse*, also of 10./JG 3, *Oblt.* Gustav Frielinghaus, *Kapitän* of 11./JG 3 with 66 victories and *Lt.* Herbert Kutscha, *Staffelkapitän* of 12./JG 3 with 24 victories and a holder of the *Ritterkreuz,* awarded for his close-support work on the Eastern Front. The *Gruppe* was soon in action and on 2 July six of its pilots claimed seven B-24s, two of which were destroyed by *Lt.* Wessling, probably with conventional armament.

ABOVE: Generalmajor Galland, on the right, pictured in conversation with Oblt. Lützow. According to one Luftwaffe NCO signaller who observed Galland when the latter spent two months in the plotting room at Comiso, he did not leave a good impression and was regarded by the plotting staff as both proud and vain. Although always scrupulously careful about his appearance, Galland was said to be temperamentally very moody and excitable and was easily upset by trivialities.The plotting staff suffered particularly from his irascibility, which affected them all and made them feel nervous and unsure of themselves. He was similarly unpopular with the pilots under his command and was particularly hard on those who had flown many operations but who had no victories.

On 1 July, I./JG 77 carried out an operation over Malta, the first since the preceding year when the *Gruppe* had frequently flown over the island. In this sweep, its pilots claimed three Spitfires for no loss, but strong Allied pressure against the Germans' airfields kept their fighter units constantly on the move. On 3 July, II./JG 27 left Lecce for San Vito di Normanni, while I./JG 53 went to San Pietro. Two days later, US bombers launched concentrated attacks against the Sicilian airfields at Catania and Gerbini which, because of a lack of an adequate early warning system, resulted in the claimed destruction of more than 100 Axis machines on the ground. Although perhaps exaggerated, this figure nevertheless provides an indication of the level of enemy activity over Sicily. On the 8th, Johannes Steinhoff, *Kommodore* of JG 77, claimed his third *Abschuss* of the month, a P-40, in addition to a Martlet and a B-17 claimed earlier, and brought his total number of victories to 160.

In the period from 1 June to 9 July, JG 53 was continuously engaged and although the pilots of this *Geschwader* claimed 85 *Luftsiege*, only 13 of them were B-17 or B-24 bombers and the unit suffered casualties amounting to 14 pilots killed, 20 wounded and two captured. Among these were two *Staffelkapitäne*; *Oblt.* Willi Klein of 1./JG 53, credited with six victories, who was killed on the 5th, and *Oblt.* Herbert Broennle of 2./JG 53. Broennle had joined 2./JG 54 in the Autumn of 1940 and had been awarded the *Ritterkreuz* in March 1943 after achieving 56 *Luftsiege* on the Russian Front. After a short period as an instructor with EJG *West,* he was transferred to 2./JG 53 and had claimed his 58th *Luftsieg*, a B-24 Liberator, on 2 July, two days before his death.

In addition to the pilot losses, approximately 40 aircraft of the *'Pik As' Geschwader* were totally destroyed in the same period, but here it is necessary to exercise some caution as units were not reporting all losses which were, therefore, certainly higher. It is also possible that the work of the mechanics was hindered so that machines still considered repairable, and not therefore recorded as losses, later had to be abandoned. For example, it is surprising that whereas I./JG 77 reported a strength of 38 machines, of which 28 were airworthy, on 30 June, only one week later, its pilots fetched new aircraft from Vicenza. It is also possible that many Bf 109s were severely damaged and not reported to the appropriate authorities for fear of unpleasant reactions from Galland or other senior officers in Berlin.

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[3] After the war, Galland did his best to conceal this less than glorious episode in his career. Although in his autobiography he mentions his clashes with Göring during the Battle of Britain and his eagerness to protect his men in 1940 and 1941, once promoted to General and directly subordinate to the high command, he demanded results regardless of their feasibility and cost.

Meanwhile, in Sardinia, II./JG 51 had suffered a few losses, all inexperienced pilots and mainly in accidents, and had claimed only nine victories in six weeks. This was hardly surprising for, although the German command was unaware of it, the Allies were actively preparing for an invasion of Sicily and Sardinia remained a secondary target.

On 9 July, IV./JG 27, which in the weeks before had lost five pilots in various accidents, could at last claim its first victories when its pilots shot down two B-24s attacking targets on Crete. Soon, however, the *Gruppe* would be involved in far more significant actions.

Operational Fighter, Reconnaissance and Ground-attack Units of Luftflotte 2, 10 July[4]

Short-range Reconnaissance

4.(*H*)/12	Bf 109	9 (7)	Decimomannu	Sardinia
2.(*H*)/14	Bf 109	12 (5)	Catania	Sicily

Long-Range Reconnaissance

3.(*F*)/33	Ju 88	9 (5)	Ottana	Sardinia
Stab (*F*)/122	Ju 88	1 (0)	Frosinone	Italy
2.(*F*)/122	Ju 88 & Me 410	11 (5)	Trapani	Sicily
1.(*F*)/123	Ju 88	4 (3)	Frosinone	Italy

Fighters:

IV./JG 3	Bf 109	36 (28)	Lecce	Italy
II./JG 27	Bf 109	22 (14)	Vibo Valentia	Italy
II./JG 51	Bf 109	34 (23)	Casa Zeppara	Sardinia, to Trapani
Stab/JG 53	Bf 109	6 (2)	Comiso	Sicily
I./JG 53	Bf 109	36 (15)	Vibo Valentia	Italy
II./JG 53	Bf 109	23 (18)	Gerbini	Sicily
III./JG 53	Bf 109	30 (12)	Catania	Sicily
Stab/JG 77	Bf 109	3 (2)	Trapani	Sicily
I./JG 77	Bf 109	39 (18)	Trapani/Sciacca	Sicily
II./JG 77	Bf 109	35 (3)	Trapani/Gerbini	Sicily
III./JG 77	Bf 109	36 (30)	Chilivani	Sardinia

Fighter-Bombers (*Jabos*):

Stab/SKG 10	Fw 190	4 (2)	Gerbini	Sicily
II./SKG 10	Fw 190	20 (12)	Gerbini	Sicily
III./SKG 10	Fw 190	25 (18)	San Pietro	Sicily
IV./SKG 10	Fw 190	25 (11)	Gerbini	Sicily

Night-Fighters:

II./NJG 2	Ju 88	14 (11)	Comiso	Sicily

Twin-engined Fighters *(Zerstörer*):

II./ZG 1	Bf 110	33 (17)	Montecorvino	Italy
Stab/ZG 26	Bf 110	2 (2)	Napoli-Camaldoli	Italy
III./ZG 26	Bf 110	29 (25)	Ciampino & Pisa	Italy
10./ZG 26	Ju 88	17 (7)	Pratica di Mare	Italy

Ground-Attack *(Schlacht*):

Stab/Sch.G 2	Fw 190	1 (0)	Milis, Sardinia to Castelvetrano, Sicily	
I./Sch.G 2, less 4. *Staffel*	Fw 190	32 (20)	Milis to Castelvetrano	
II./Sch.G 2 less 8. *Staffel*	Fw 190	27 (16)	Milis to Castelvetrano	

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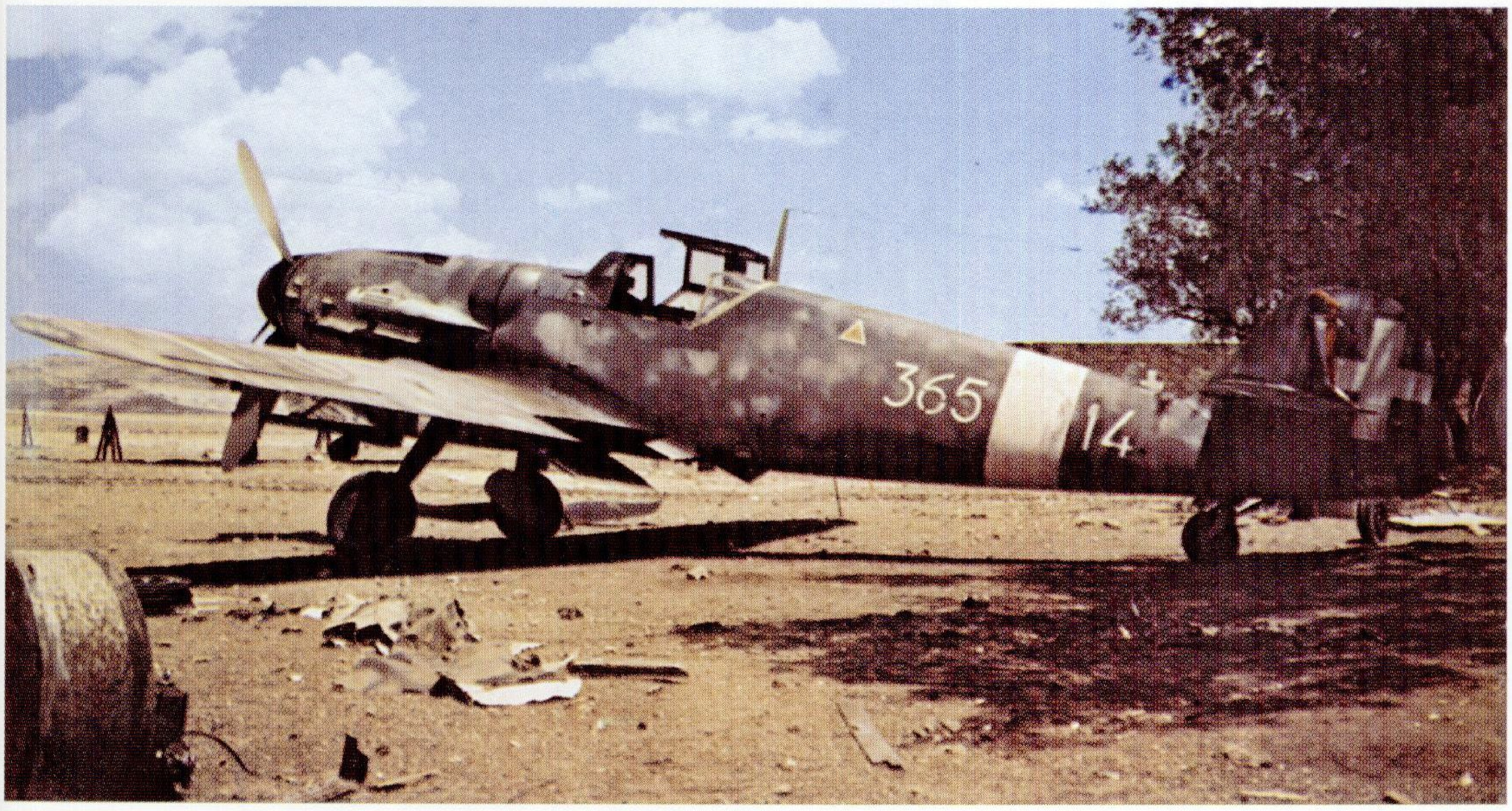
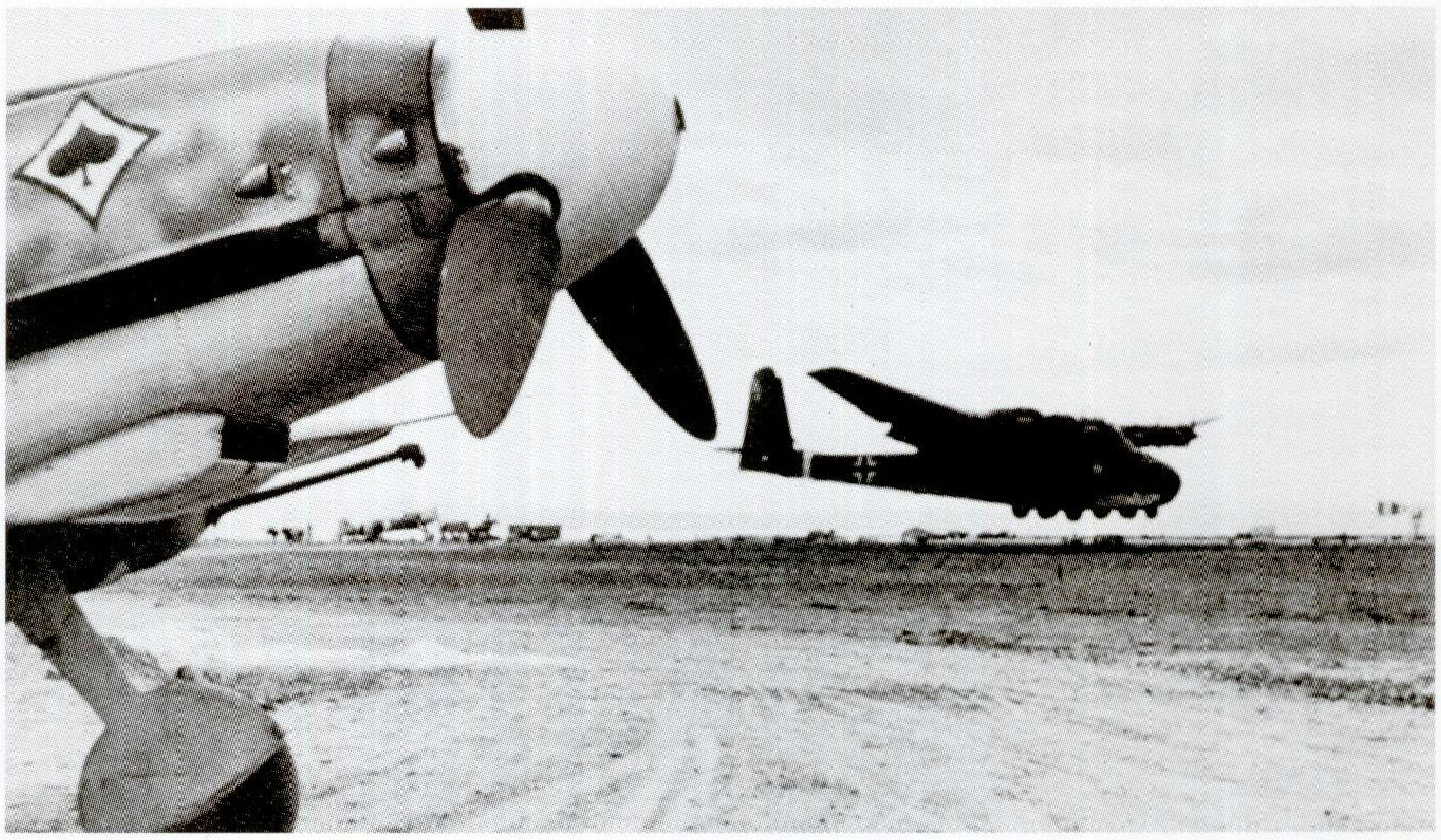
[4] Information from an RAF A.I. 3b Order of Battle.

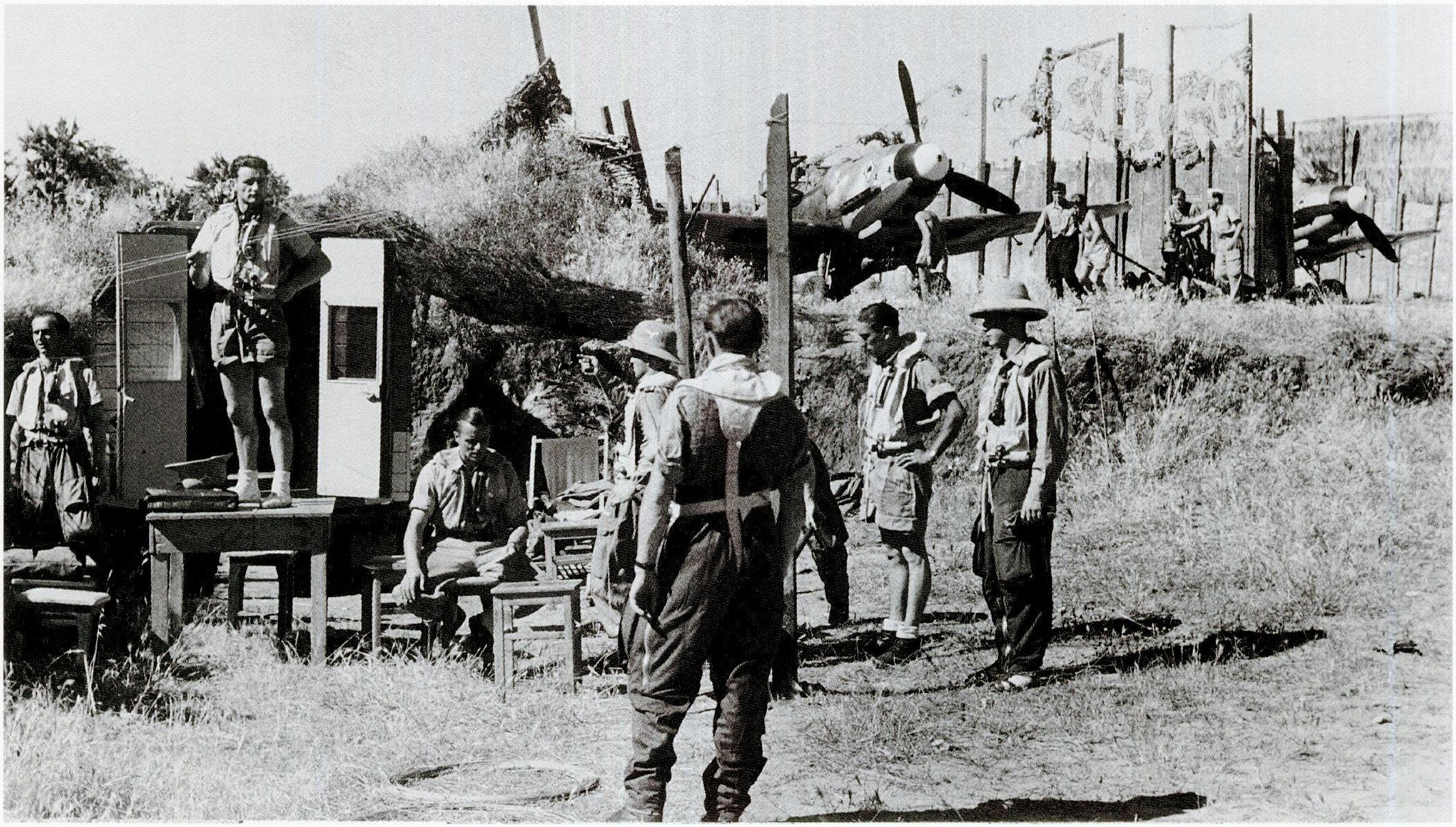


LEFT: A Bf 109 G-6 trop of the Regia Aeronautica on Sicily. An interesting feature of this particular example, which belonged to the 365ª Squadriglia, is the camouflage, which appears to have been a mixture of German and Italian colours, the latter being particularly predominant on the fuselage sides aft of the cockpit where the original German markings have been overpainted. A similar effect would also have appeared elsewhere on the aircraft where the Balkenkreuz were replaced with Italian markings. Note the sand colour on the rear canopy frame.

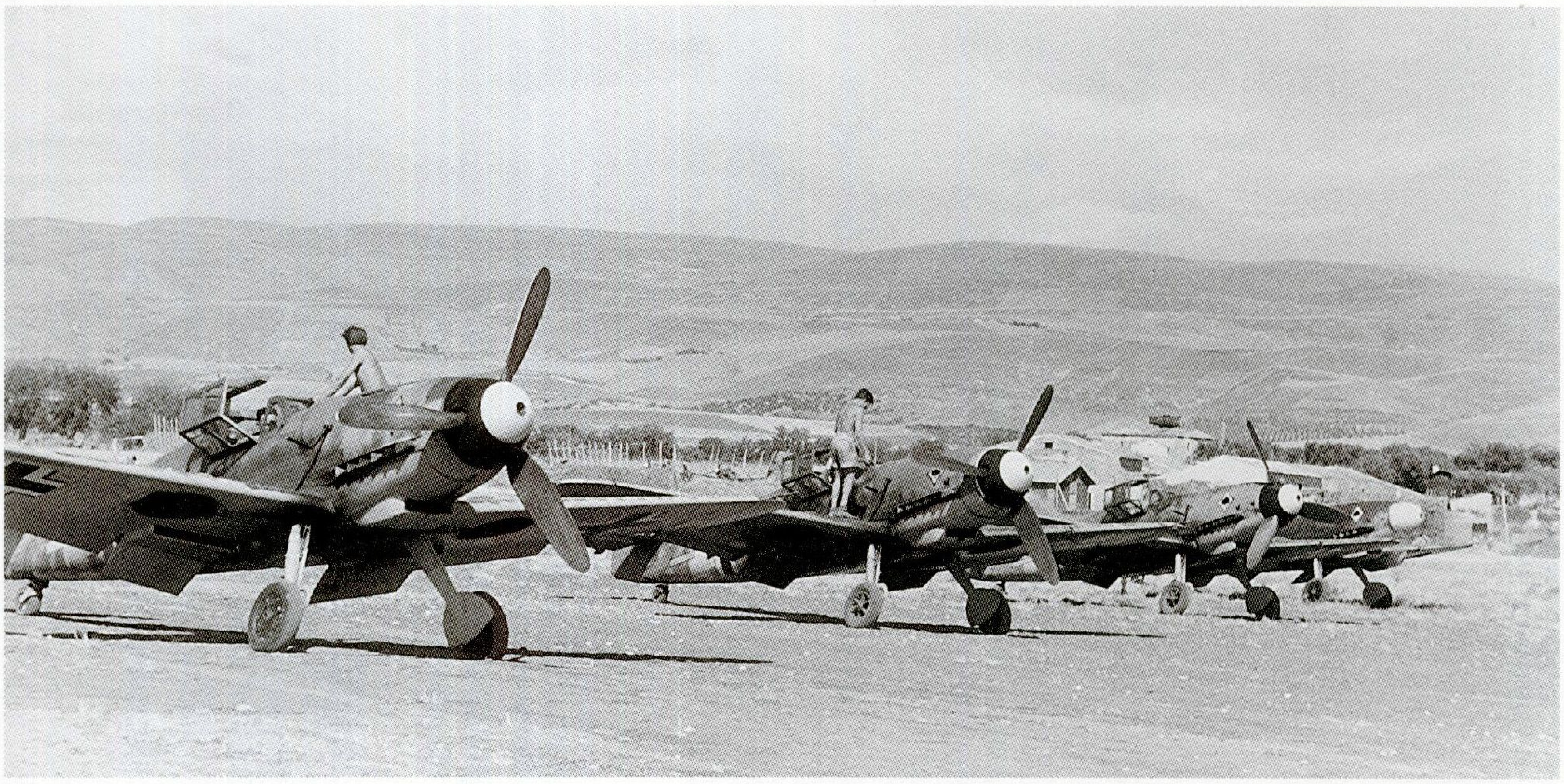
RIGHT: Between the Axis surrender of Tunisia and the Allied invasion of Sicily, some attempts were made to reinforce the garrisons on Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, in which air transport played its part. Here, an Me 323 lands on one of the airfields in Sicily inhabited by JG 53 and a Fw 190 fighter-bomber unit, aircraft from which may be seen in the foreground and middle distance respectively.

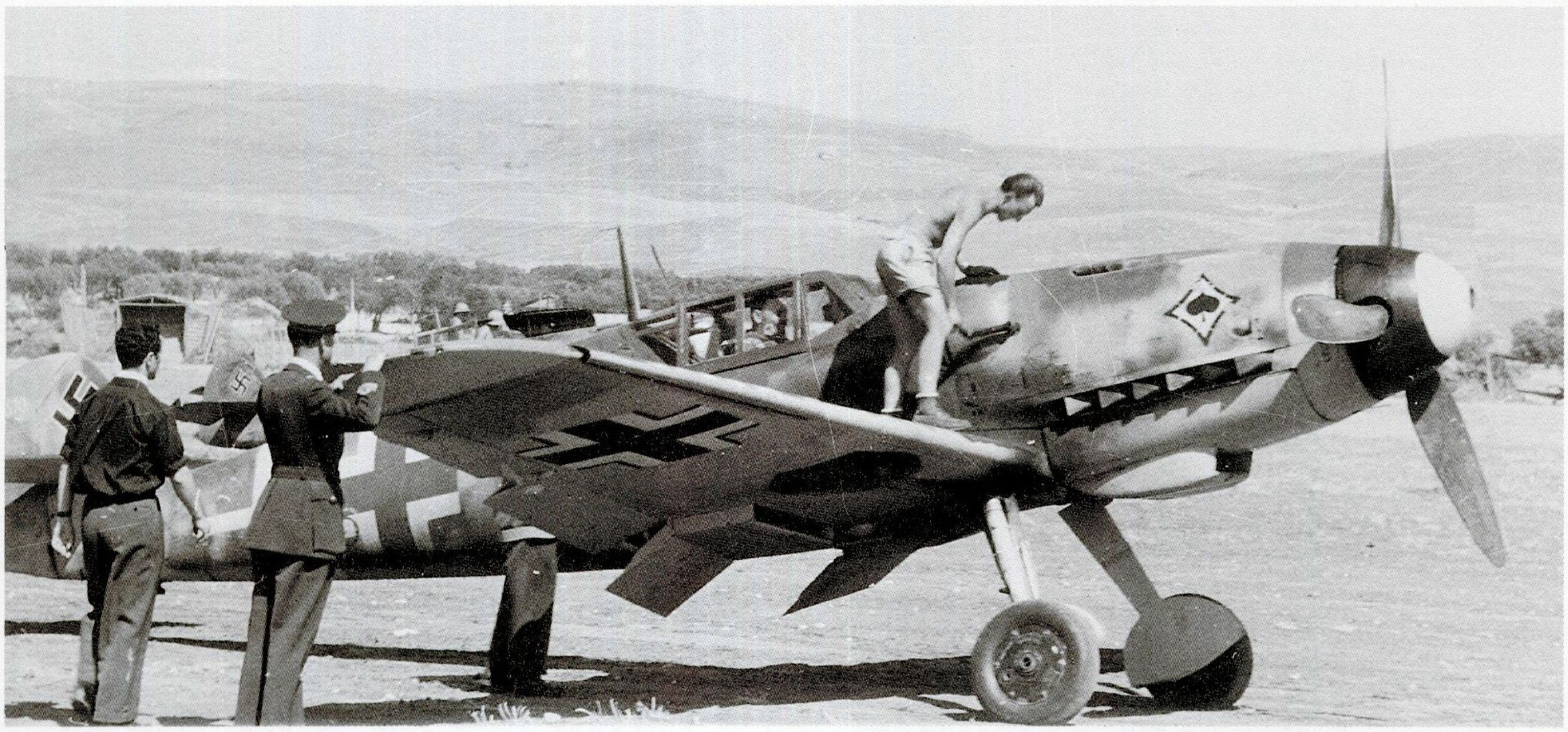


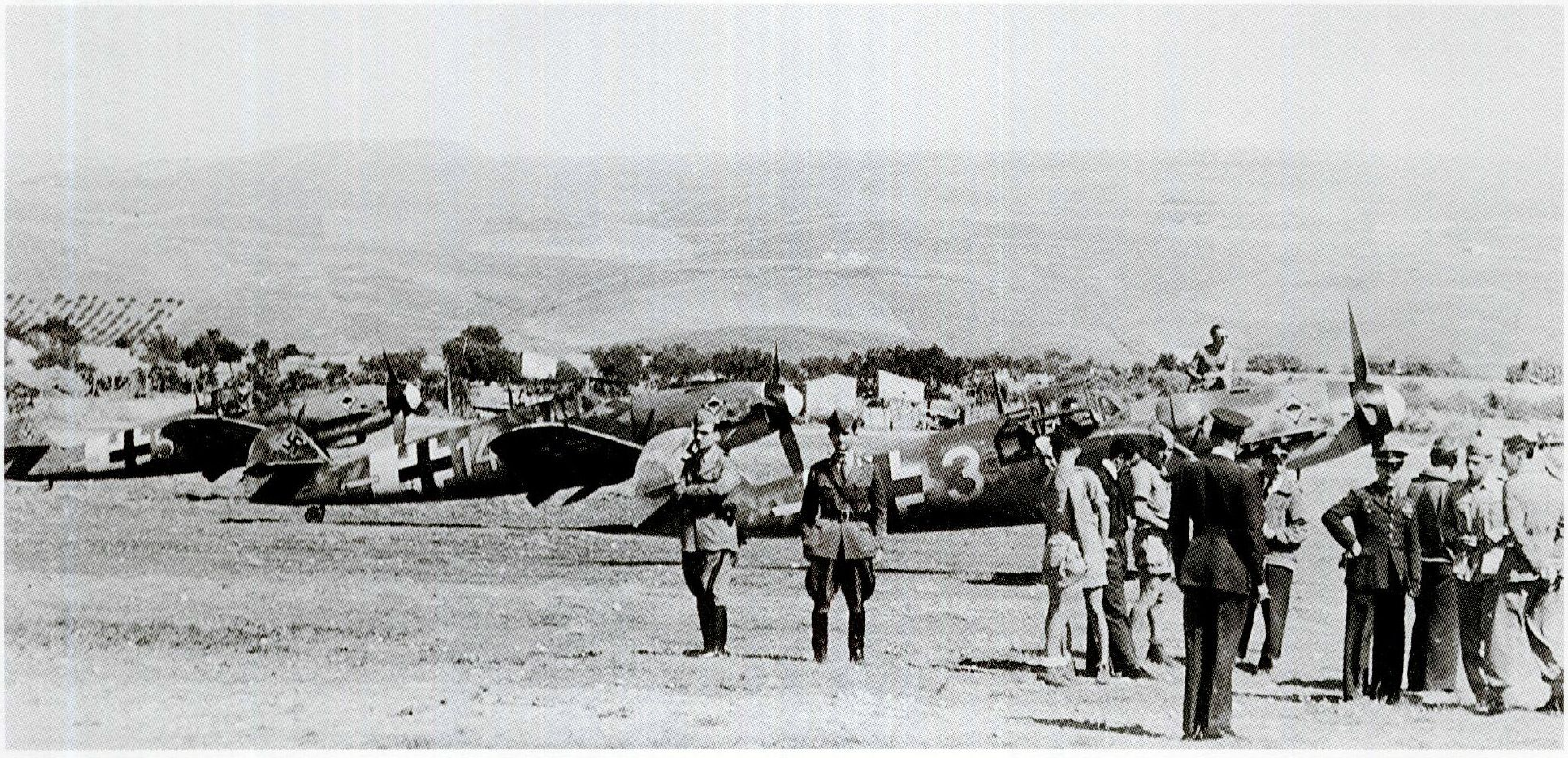
BELOW: Pilots of 5./JG 53 at Comiso on 20 May 1943, shortly before the Allied bombing campaign opened against Sicily. Seated centre left in this photograph is Oblt. Martin Laube who, as Staffelführer, was posted missing on 4 September.

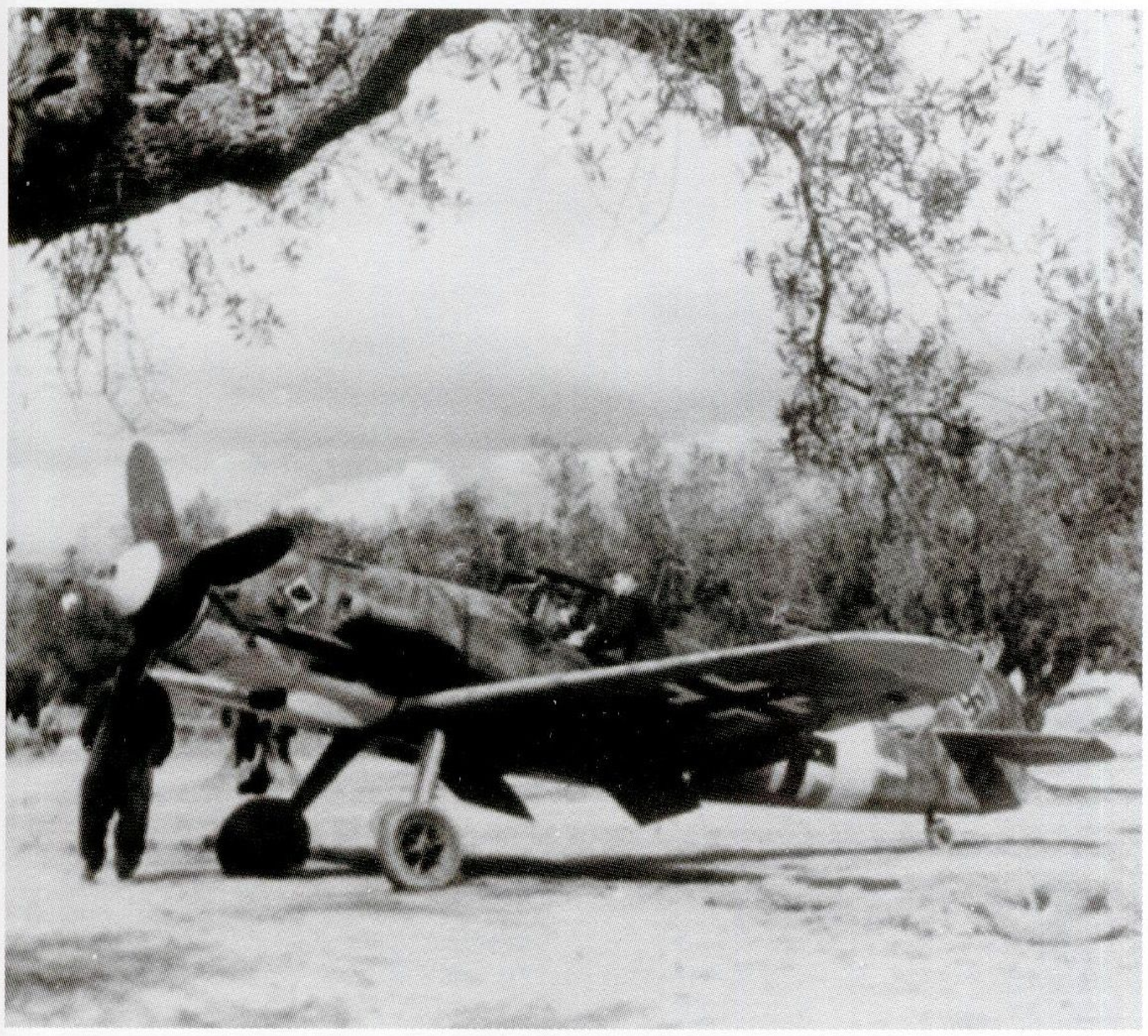


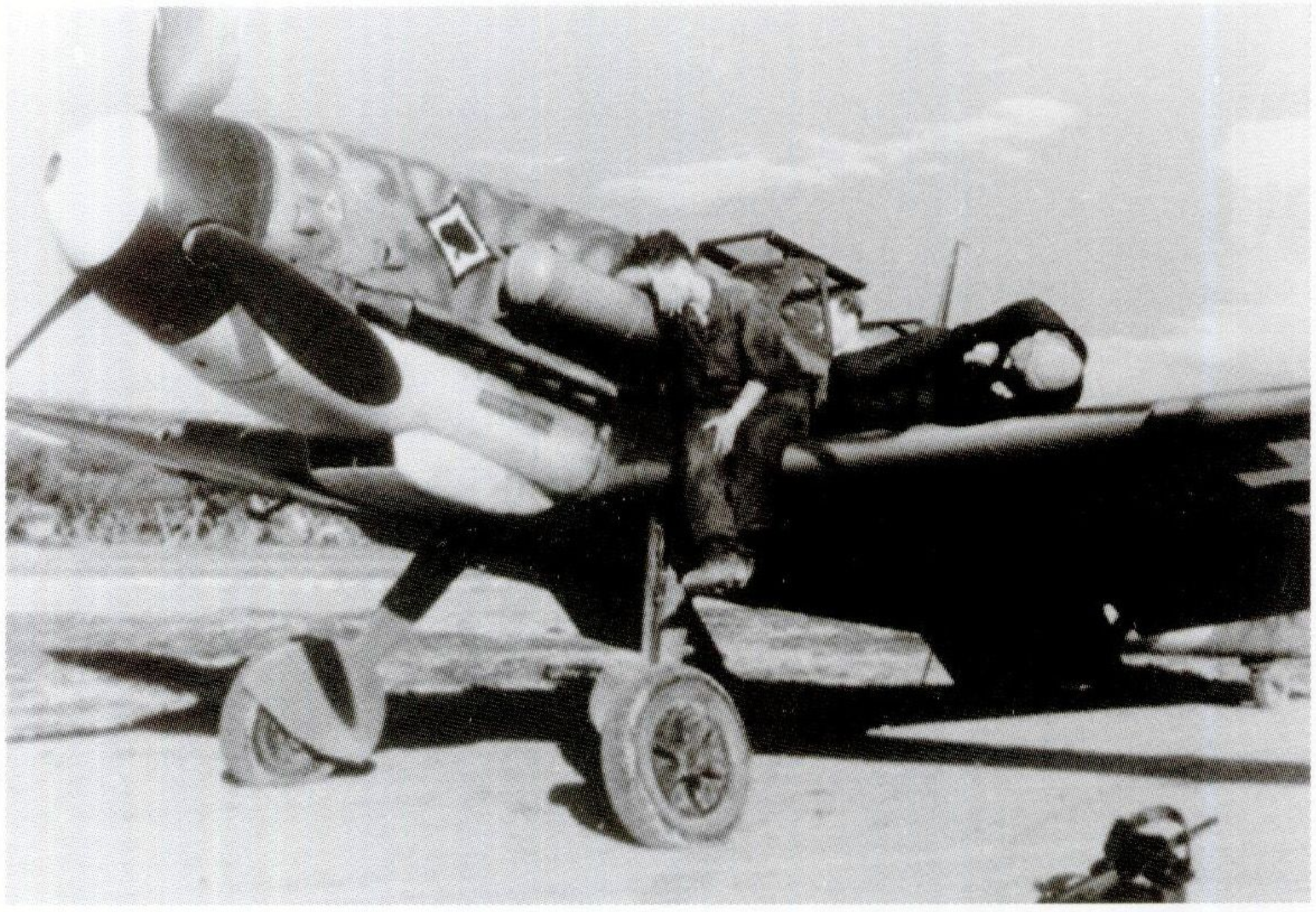
THIS PAGE: To restore the strength of the Italian Regia Aeronautica, II./JG 53 handed over 23 of its Bf 109s to the III° Gruppo Autonomo CT at Comiso on 22 May 1943. Although these aircraft suffered from wear and tear and had flown for many hours, they were nevertheless welcomed by the Italians.





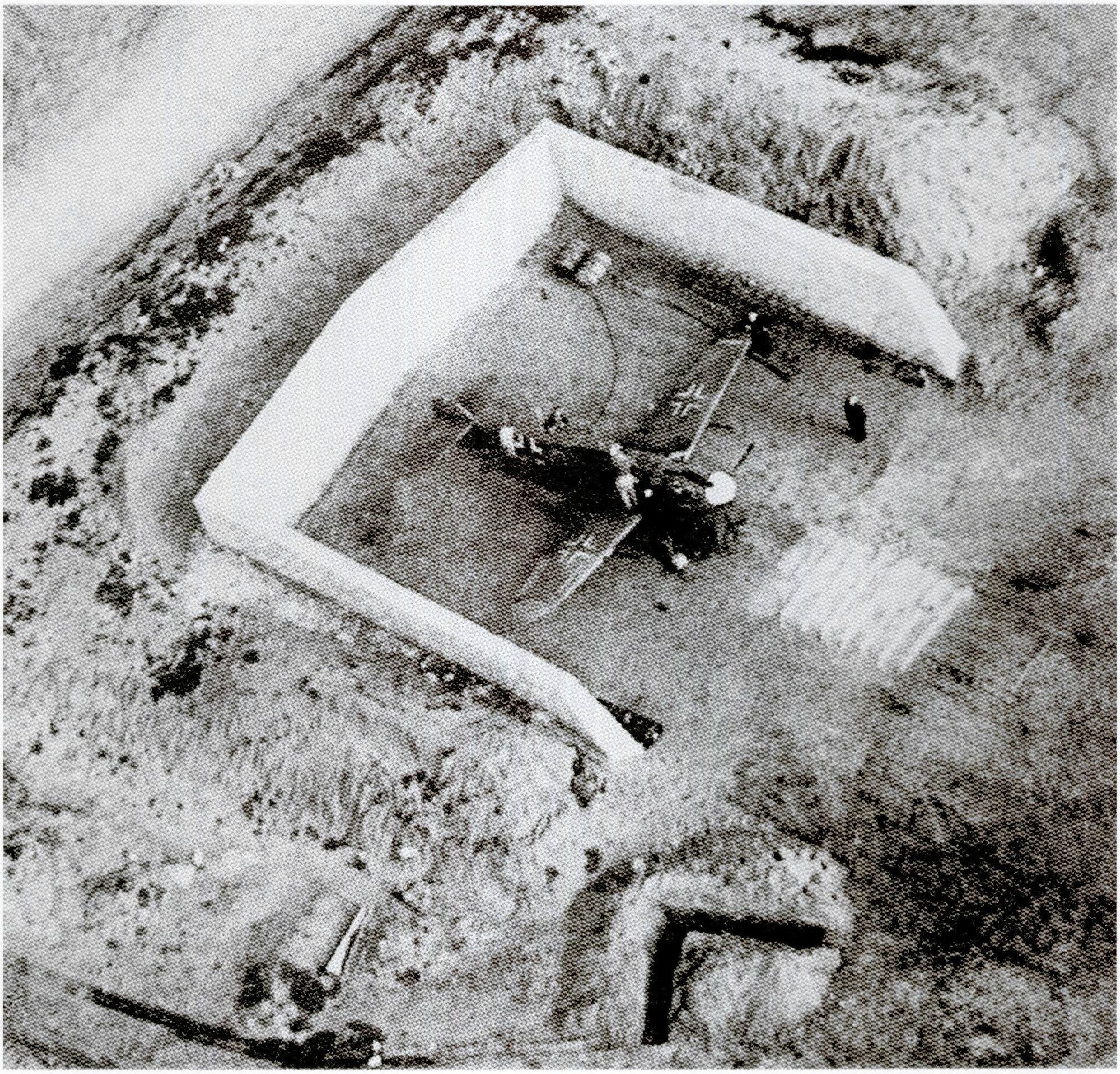




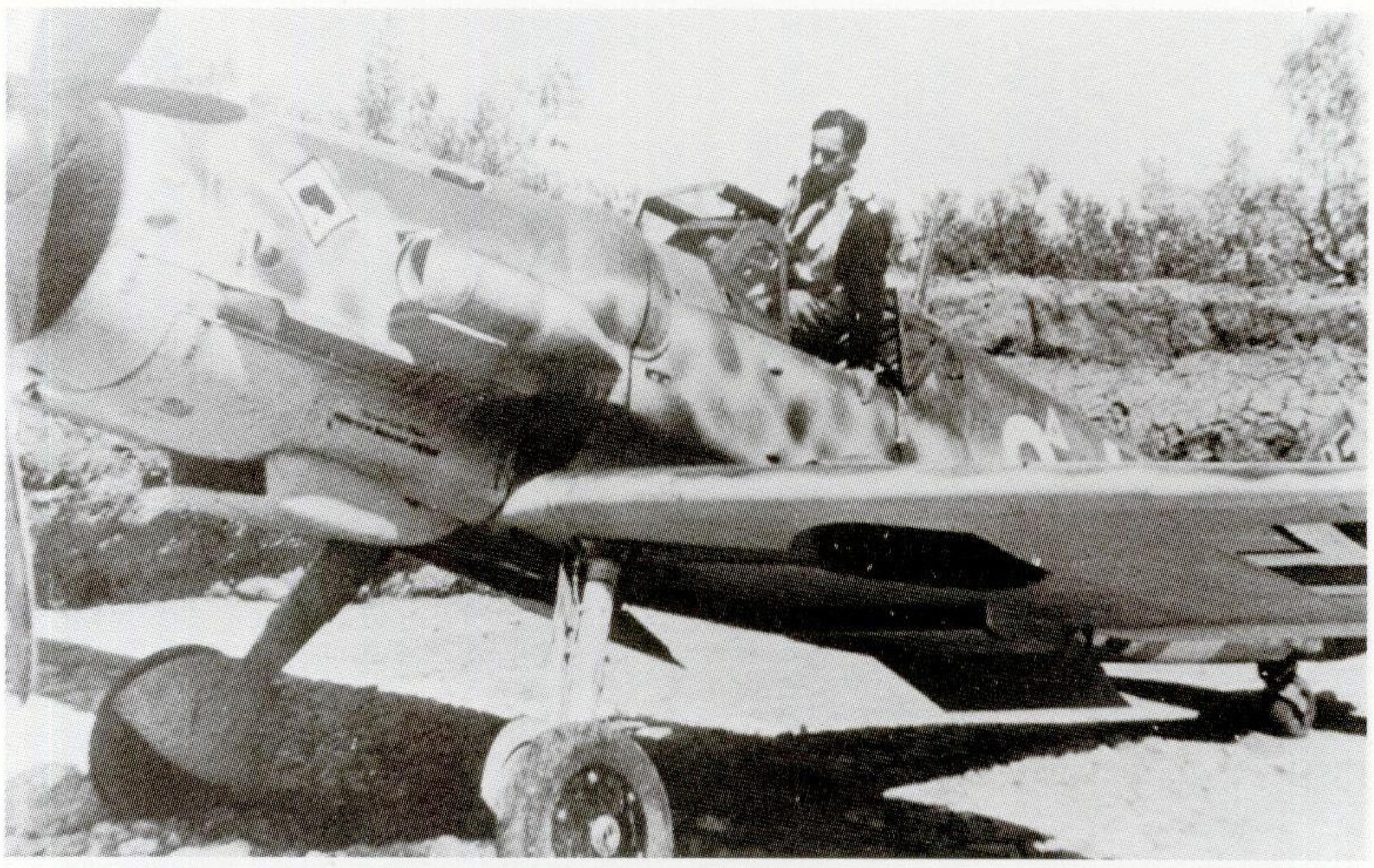


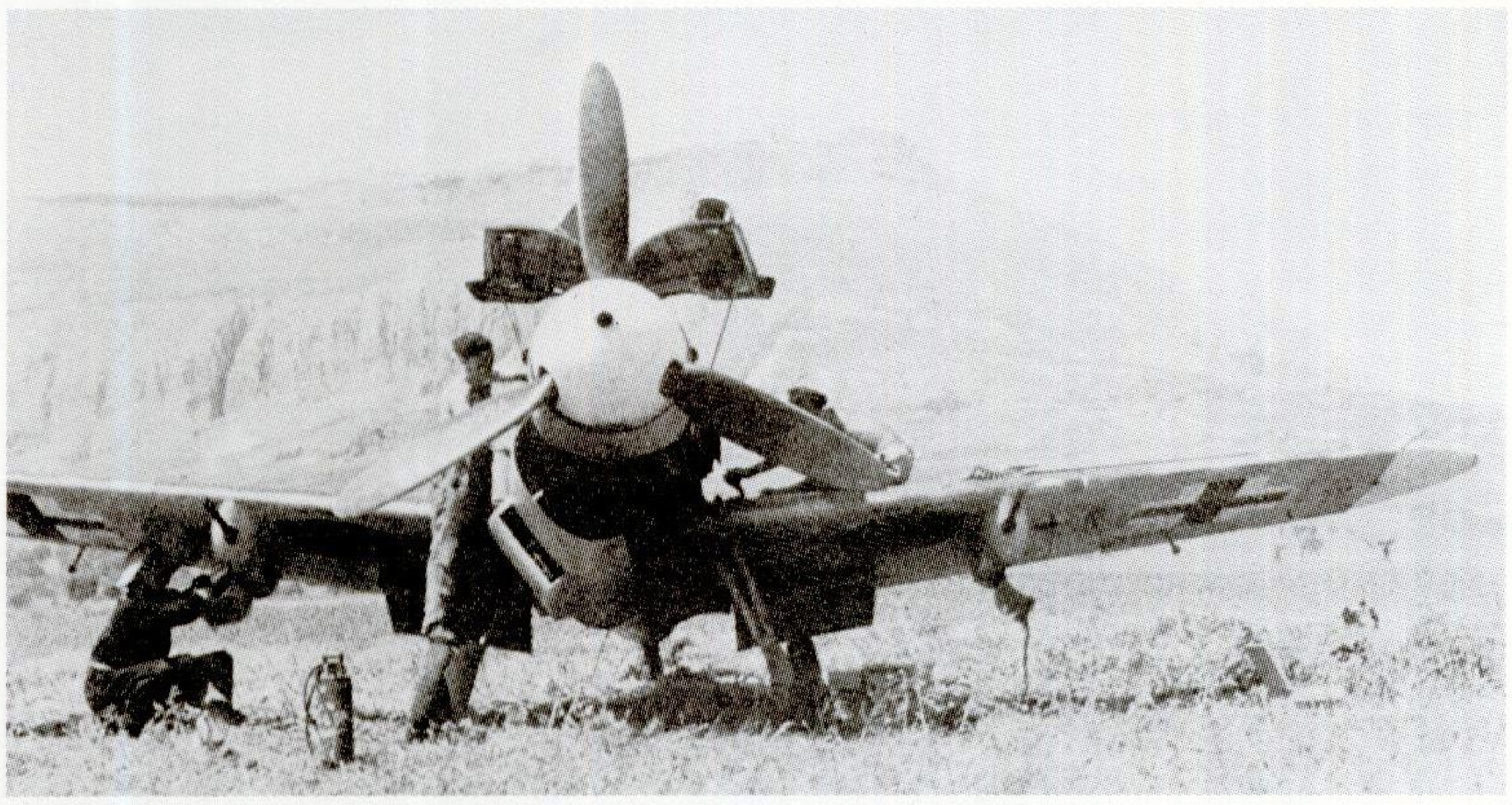
LEFT AND ABOVE: These two Bf 109 G-4s belonged to II./JG 53 and were probably photographed in Sicily in May or June 1943. Both machines have a similar uppersurface camouflage consisting of a low demarcation RLM 79 desert sand colour, over which has been sprayed a dark green pattern similar to the so-called Wellenmuster or wave pattern finish.

RIGHT: An interesting view of a Bf 109 G in its blast pen in Sicily in the summer of 1943. Just visible are the MG 151 cannon under each wing and the 'Pik As' badge on the engine cowling, indicating that this is a Bf 109 G-6/R6 of JG 53. Allied bombing of Axis airfields in Tunisia had indicated quite clearly that Axis airfields elsewhere could also expect to be attacked and this Splitterbox, literally a splinter pen, has been constructed with some care since, as an added precaution, the outer earthworks have been reinforced with an inner stone wall. Note also the 'V' shaped slit trench at the bottom of the photograph, so constructed that if a bomb splinter did enter the trench, it would not travel far. Fuel drums may be seen in the top corner of the pen and fuel lines have already been run out to the aircraft. Pumping would have been carried out by hand.

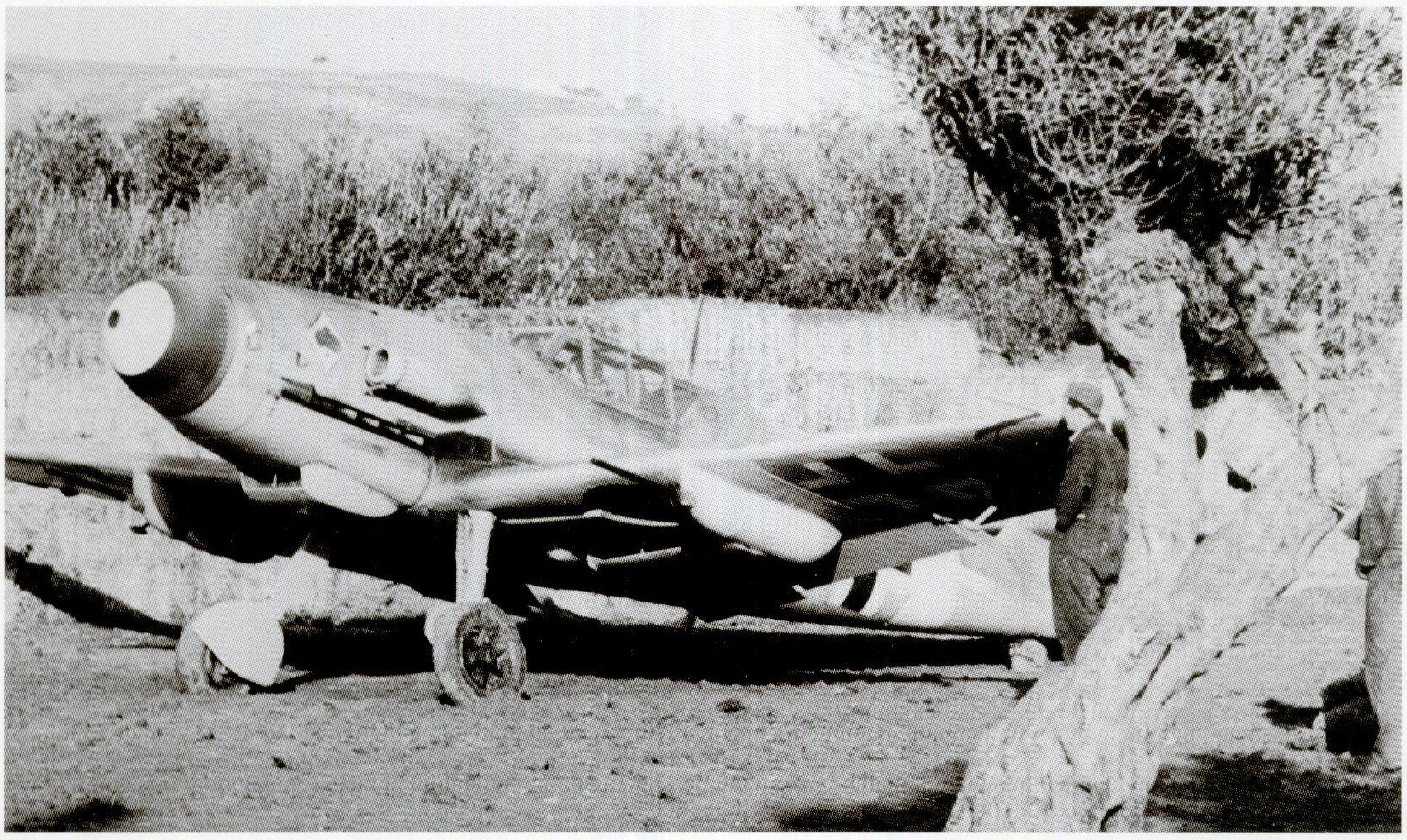


RIGHT: A Bf 109 G-6 trop of JG 53 in a classic factory day-fighter scheme. The RLM 76 undersurfaces have been carried up the fuselage sides, meeting the RLM 74 and 75 in a high demarcation line only on the uppermost surfaces. These colours also appeared on the upper wing and horizontal tail surfaces, and a mottle pattern of the same two colours, with the addition of RLM 02 mottles, has been applied to the fuselage sides. The tone of the yellow panel under the nose, although appearing very pale in this photograph, matches the yellow known to have been used in the centre of the octane triangle just visible adjacent to the fuselage number.



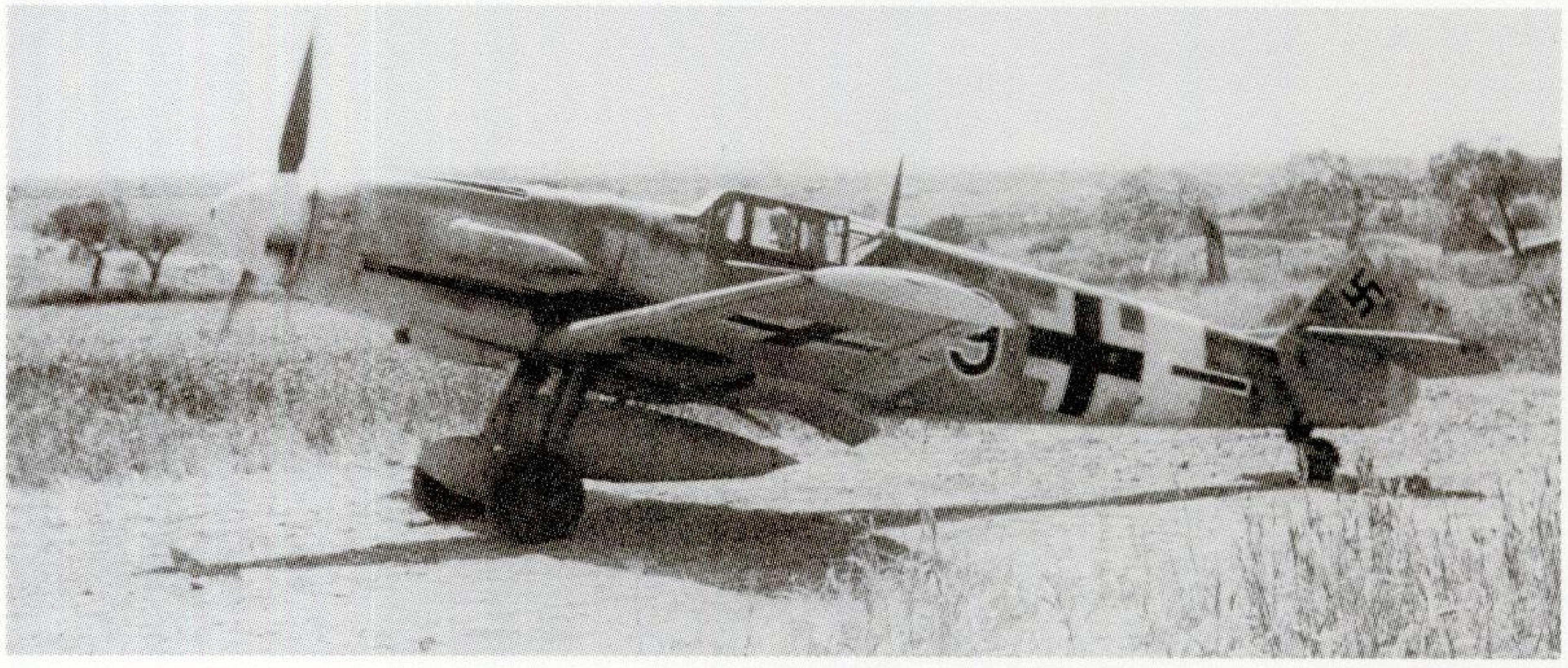


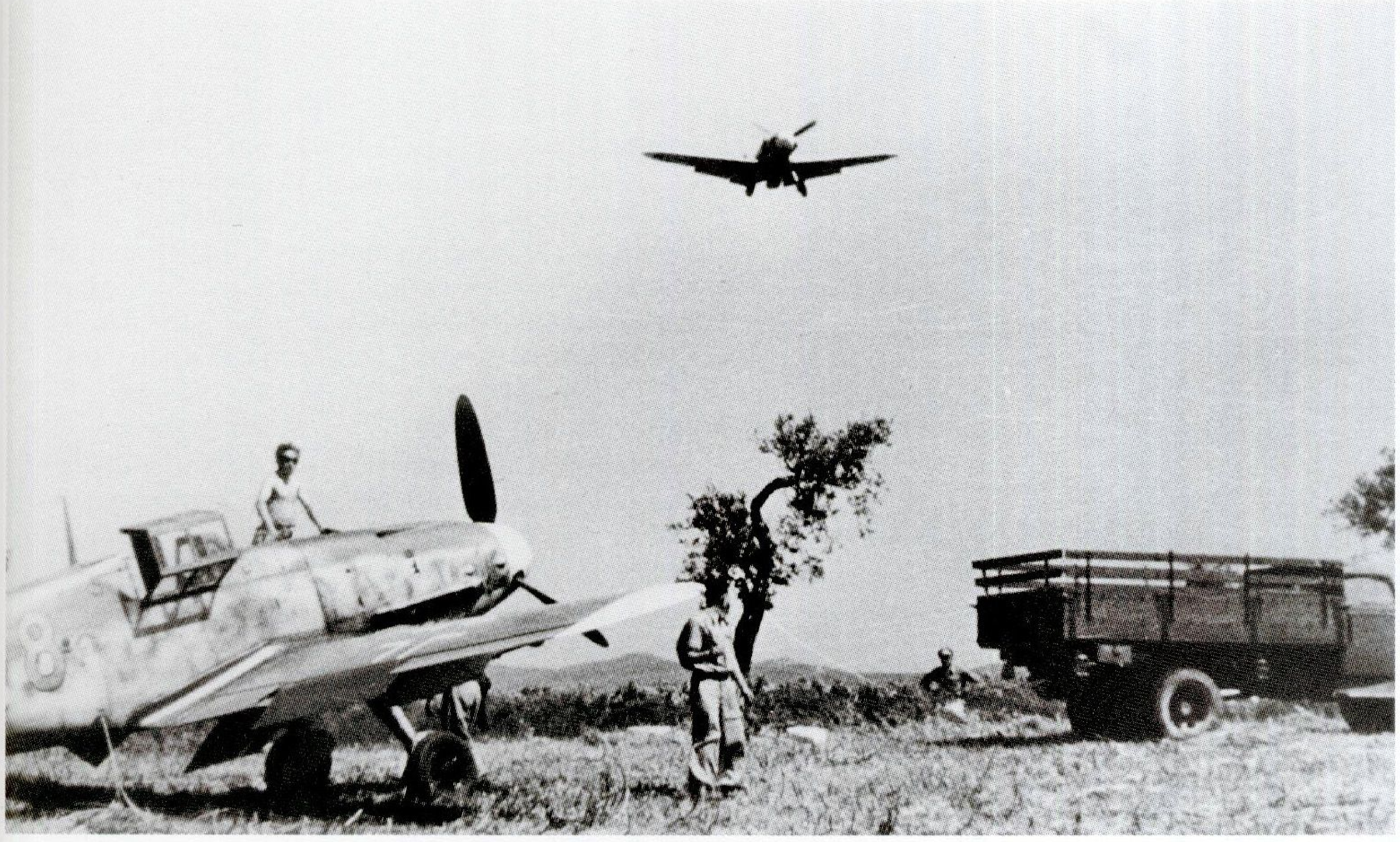
LEFT: Armourers working on 'Yellow 6', a Bf 109 G-6 of 6./JG 27, photographed at Trapani shortly after the fall of North Africa. The upper engine cowlings have been opened to allow access to the magazines for the two 13 mm MG 131 machine guns mounted over the engine, and the fairings for the two underwing MG 151s have also been opened and swung down for rearming. The ammunition for these underwing MG 151s was carried in a belt stowed in a flat circular drum, 20.5 in. in diameter by 4.5 in. deep, which was carried in the wing itself. This drum was mounted on four fibre rollers, so that when the gun was fired, the pull on the belt rotated the container and the belt passed up into a chute and down to the gun with very little drag. The container and chute when filled to maximum capacity held a total of 142 rounds, and although the whole installation was very cleverly designed, rearming the wing MG 151s was a difficult procedure as it was necessary to remove a number of awkwardly placed bolts inside the wing. Note the Werk Nummer 16600 painted on one of the propeller blades. Fw. Albin Dorfer was shot down in this machine during a reconnaissance mission to Tunisia on 7 June 1943 and was taken prisoner.



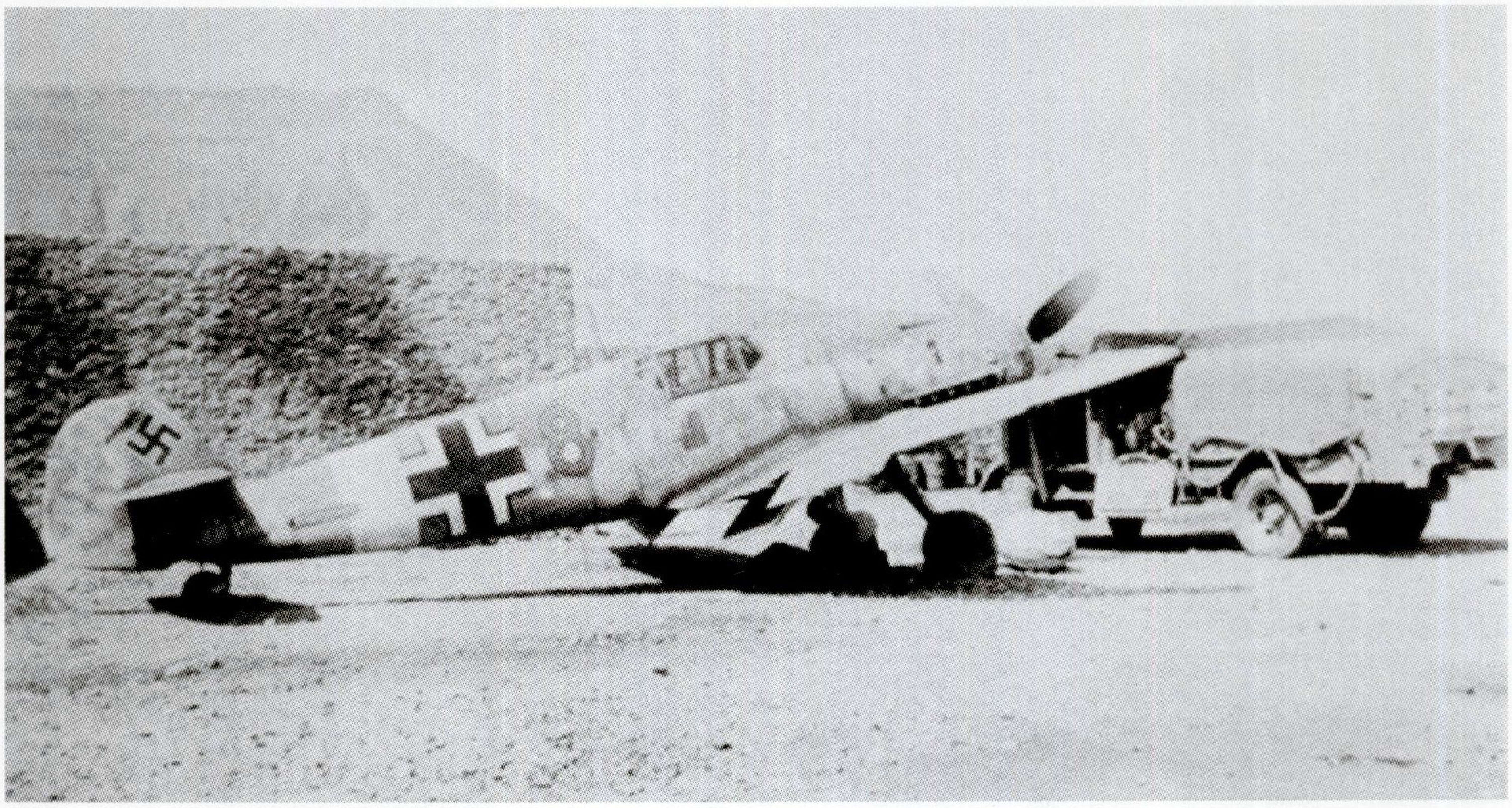
LEFT: A Bf 109 G-4 of II./JG 53 taxiing from its dispersal among the olive trees at Comiso. Like the G-2, early examples of this version suffered from engine failures due to pistons burning through. If this occurred in flight, pilots were advised that it was still considered possible to reach base by reducing the engine revolutions to 1,600 rpm and keeping the boost pressure as low as possible. Nevertheless, as Sicily was surrounded by water, pilots naturally remained apprehensive. Later, reinforced pistons were fitted.

RIGHT: 'Black 9', a Bf 109 G-6 trop of 5./JG 27, taxiing over the airfield at Trapani, probably in May or June 1943. The camouflage colours on this aircraft were RLM 74, 75 and 76 with the upper and lower surfaces of the wingtips, the spinner, and rear fuselage band in white. Unusually for the period, this aircraft is not marked with the badge of II./JG 27 and does not appear to have a yellow identification panel under the nose.





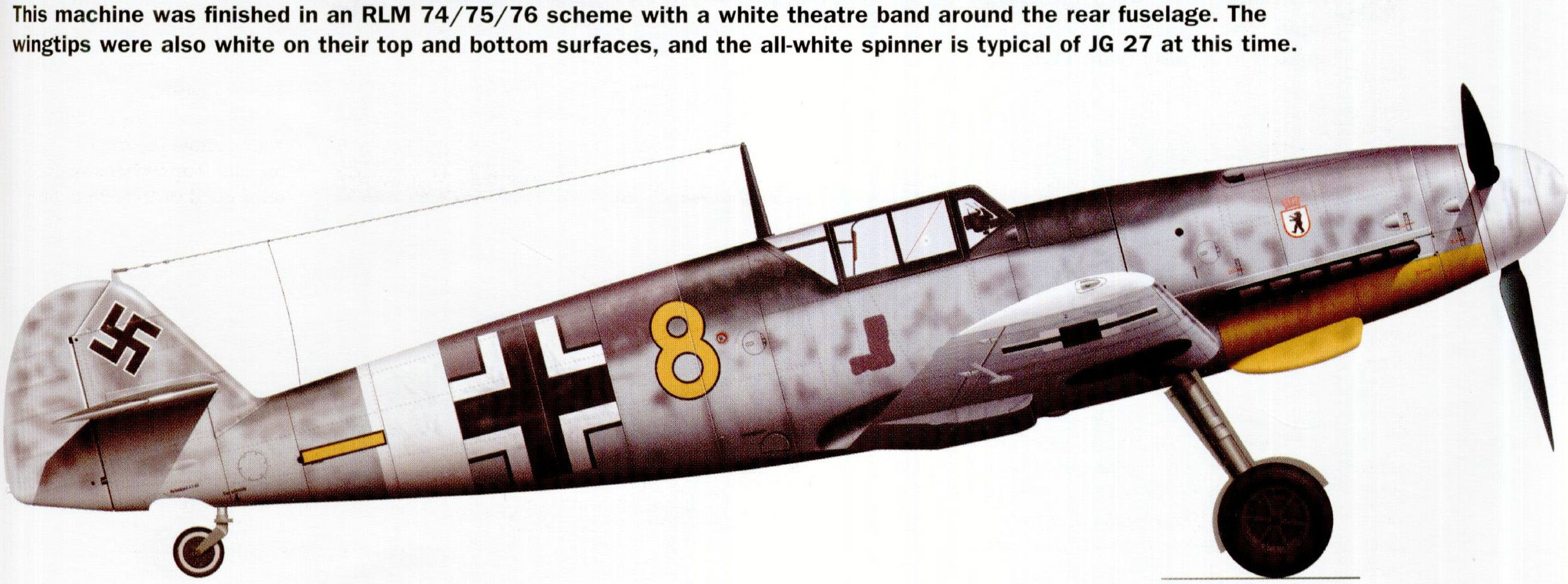
LEFT: A scene at Trapani in June 1943 as a Bf 109 G of II./JG 27 comes in to land over another of the Gruppe's aircraft, 'Yellow 8' of 6. Staffel, parked in the foreground. Just visible on the cowling is II. Gruppe's 'Berlin Bear' badge.

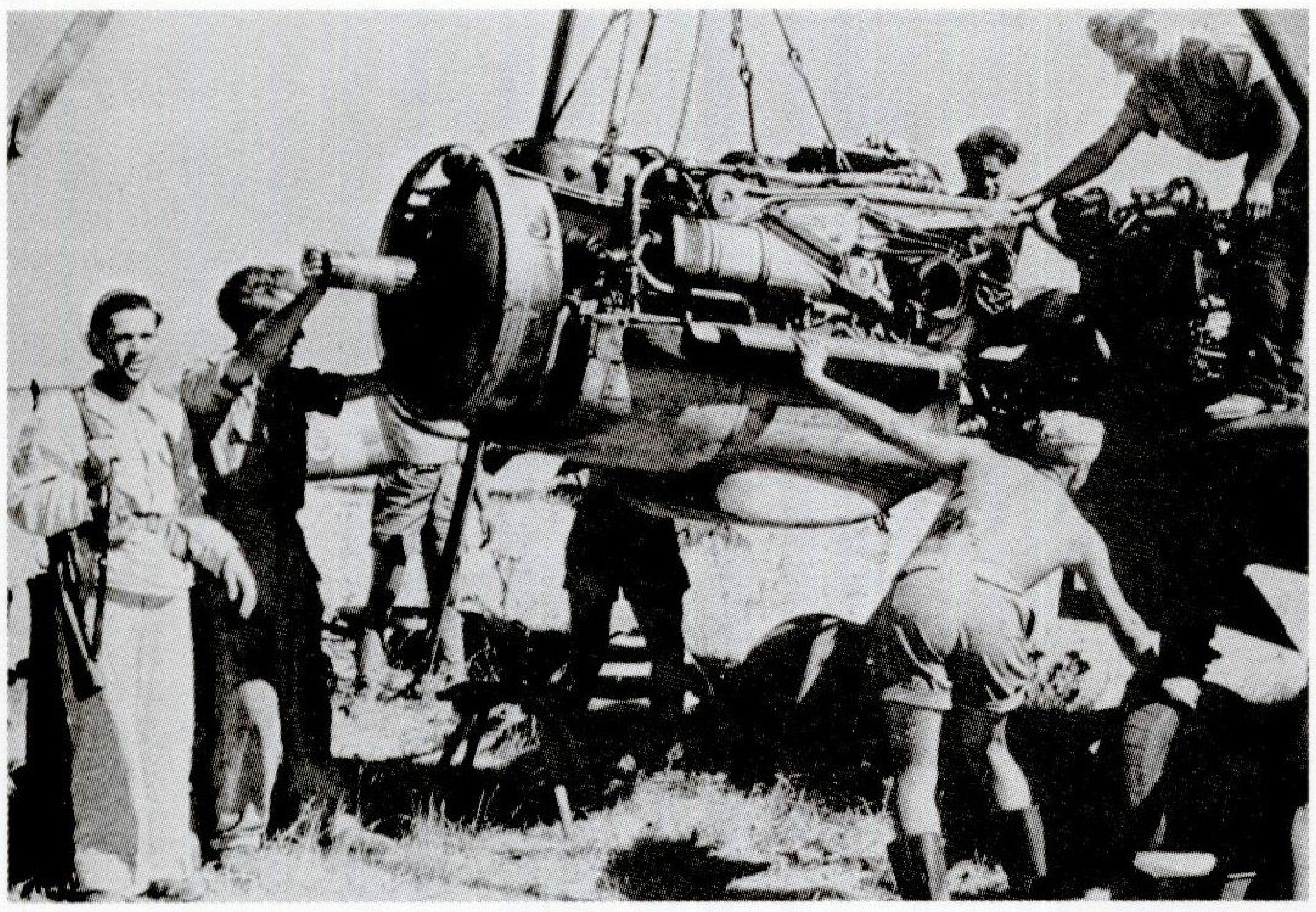


RIGHT: Another photograph of the same aircraft parked in its blast pen at Trapani. The patch under the cockpit is believed to have been repaired battle damage.

Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-4 'Yellow 8' of 6./JG 27, Trapani, June 1943

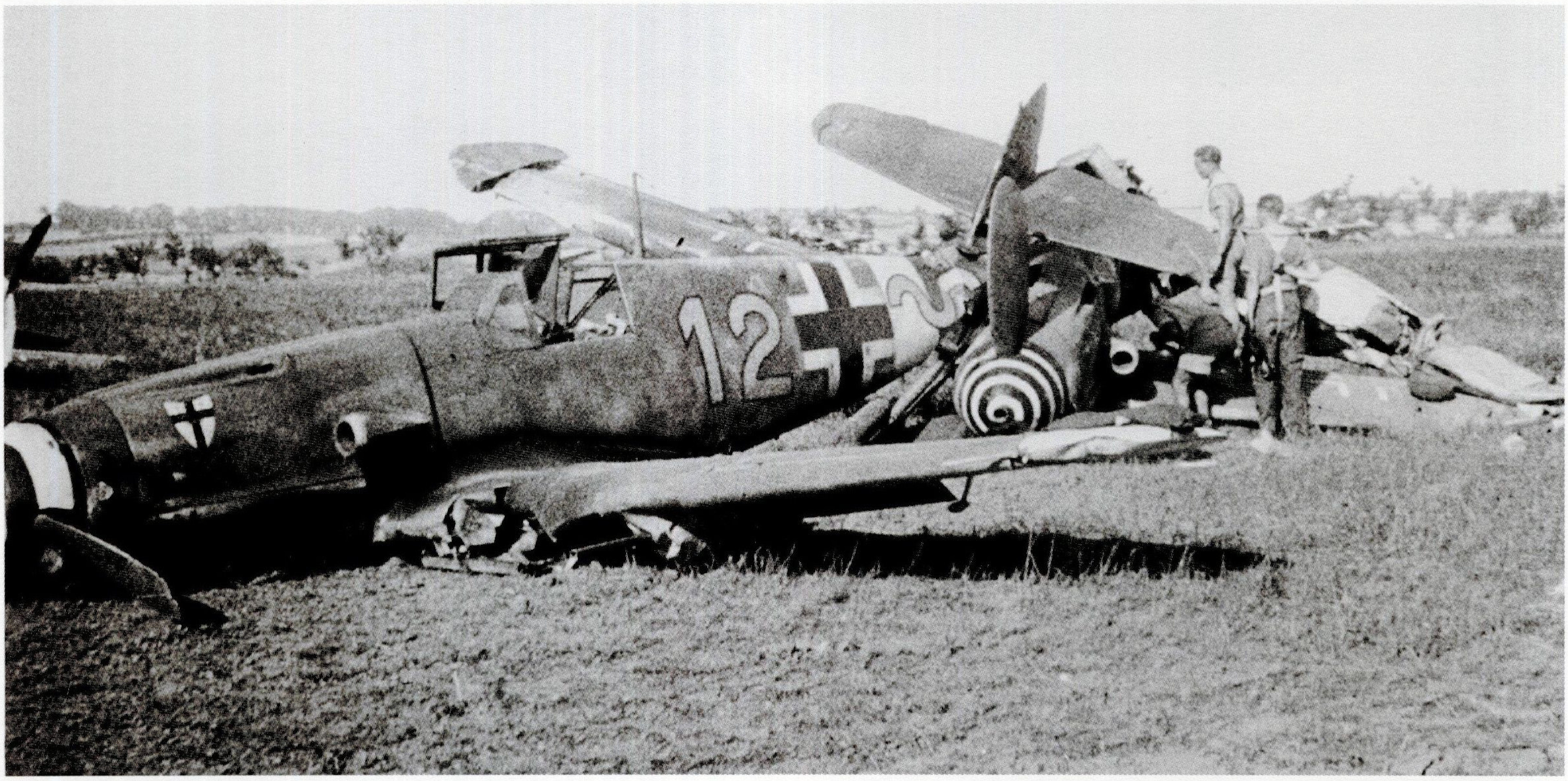
This machine was finished in an RLM 74/75/76 scheme with a white theatre band around the rear fuselage. The wingtips were also white on their top and bottom surfaces, and the all-white spinner is typical of JG 27 at this time.



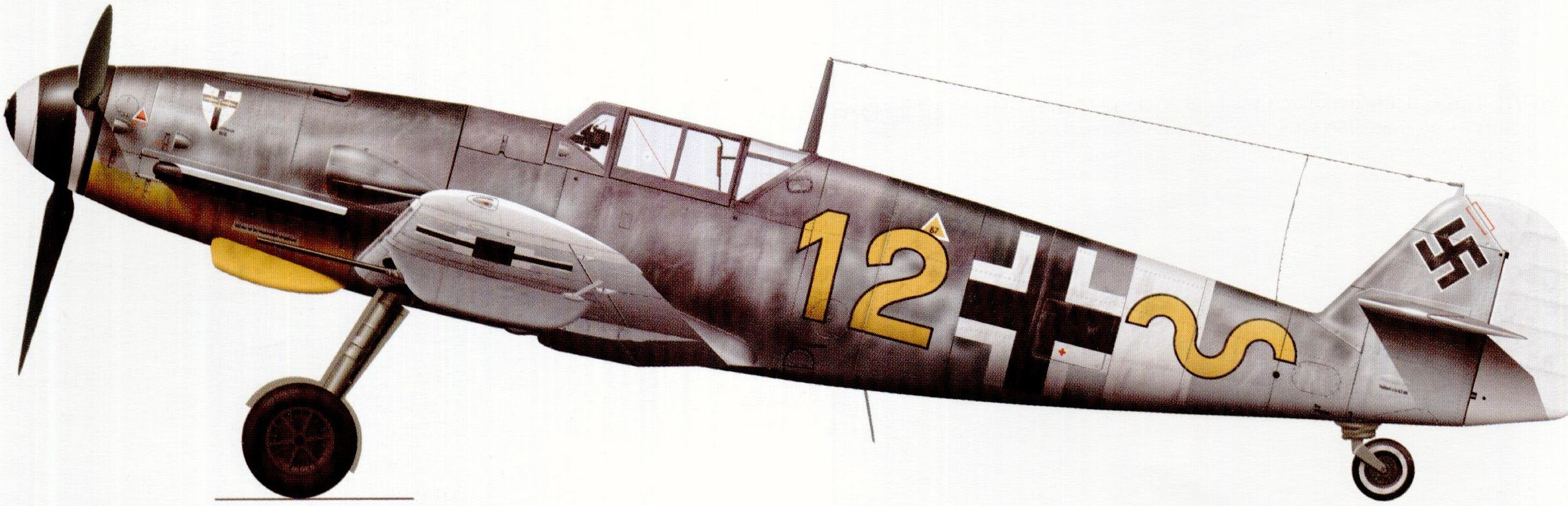


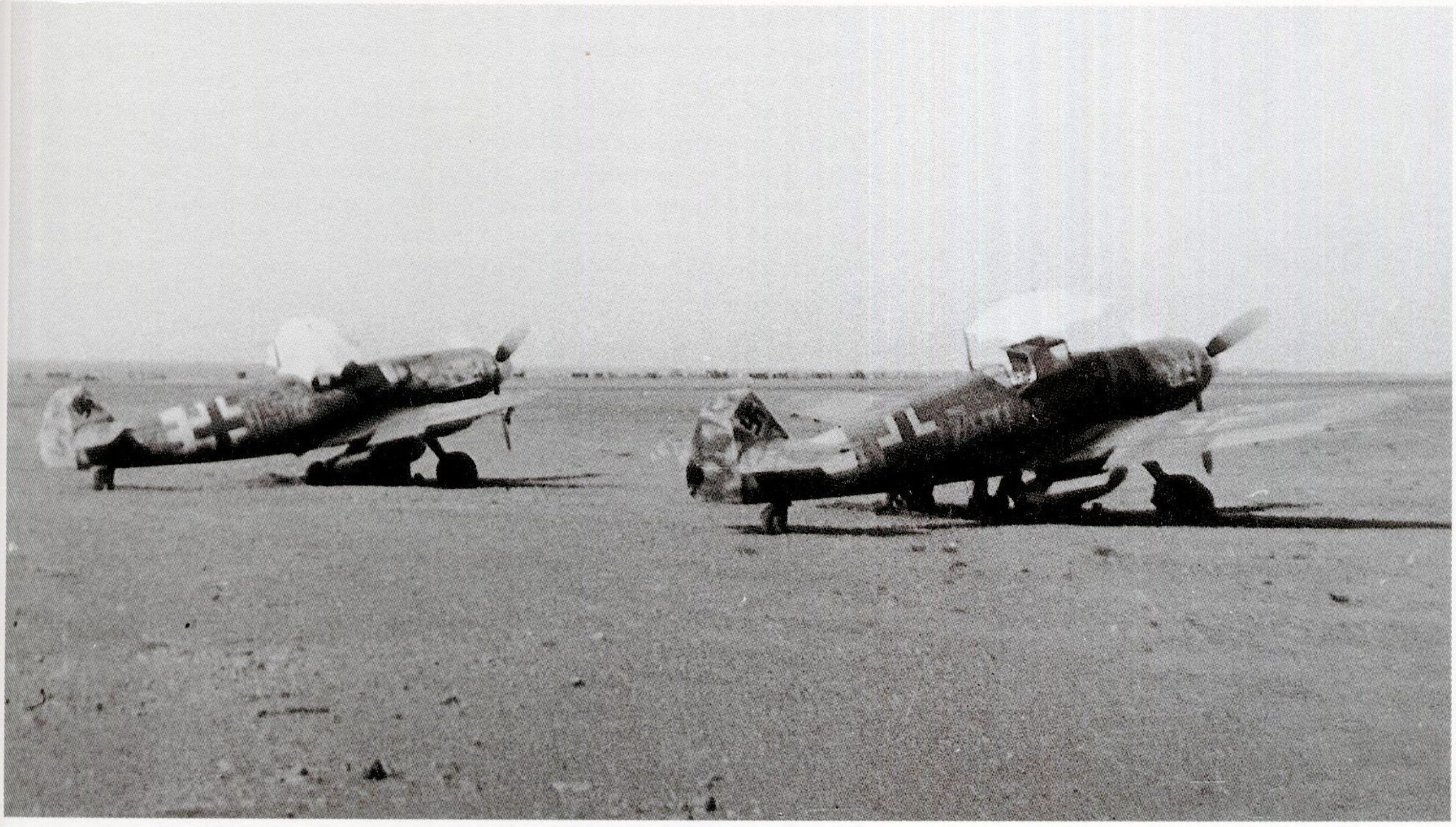
RIGHT: A Bf 109 G-6 of 9./JG 27 having its engine changed, mid-July 1943. At this time the Staffel operated for a short time over southern Italy and Sicily.

BELOW: A tangle of Bf 109s of III./JG 27 with, in the foreground, 'Yellow 12', a G-4 of 9. Staffel. These aircraft have obviously been involved in a collision and, as the unit's loss returns for III./JG 27 show that only one G-4 was damaged in these circumstances in 1943 up to the end of July, when the Gruppe left the area for Germany, it is almost certain that this photograph depicts the aftermath of that incident. This occurred when three Bf 109s – one G-4 W.Nr. 19382 and two G-6s, Werk Nummern 18294 and 18351 – collided on the ground at Argos, in the Peloponnese, on 4 July 1943. The degree of damage sustained by each aircraft was not recorded and it is unlikely that any of the pilots were injured as this photograph shows them inspecting the results of the collision. The third aircraft involved in this incident is just out of the picture to the left.

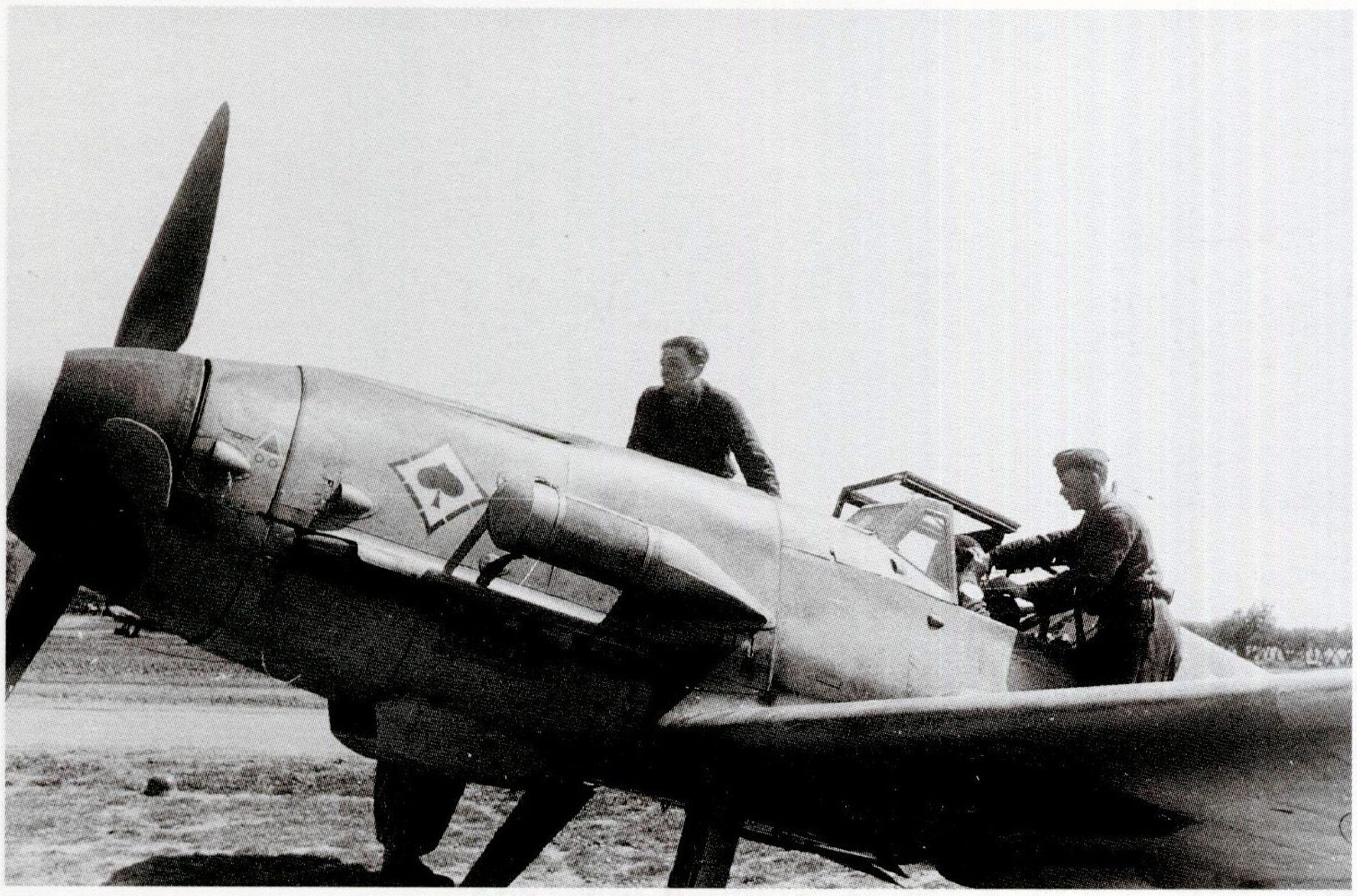


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-4 'Yellow 12' of 9./JG 27, Argos, 4 July 1943
This machine, W.Nr. 19382, was finished in an RLM 74/75/76 with a dense mottle of these colours on the fuselage sides. The badge of III./JG 27 appeared on the engine cowling and the white spiral on the RLM 70 green spinner was applied in a fairly wide style.

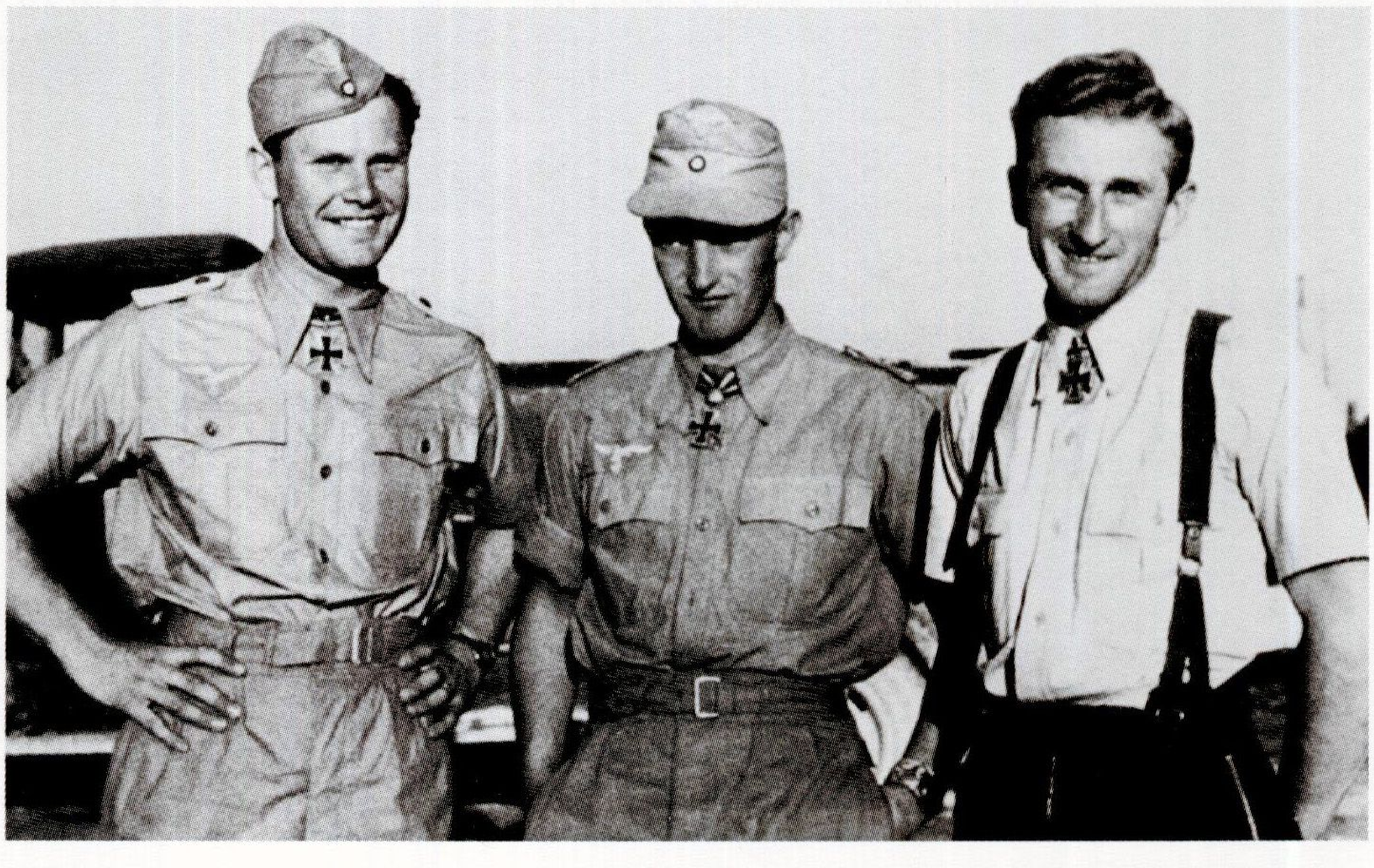




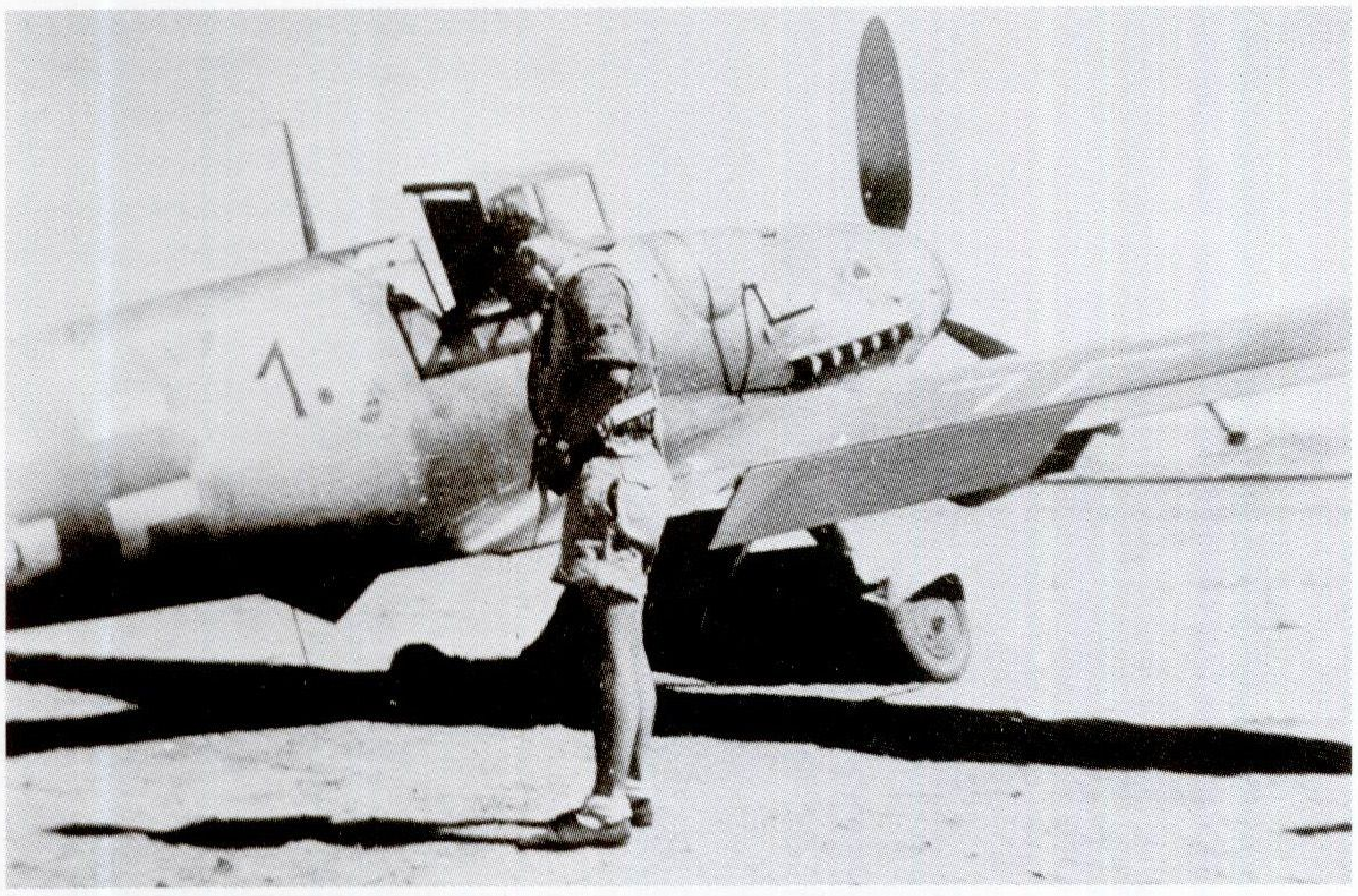
LEFT: Photographed at Tanagra in the summer of 1943, these Bf 109 G-6s, 'Yellow 7' and 'Yellow 15', belonged to 12./JG 27, a Staffel which, when a IV. Gruppe was added to the Geschwader in May 1943, had been created by redesignating the former 8. Staffel. Both machines are finished in standard grey RLM 74/75/76 camouflage colours, and while the white theatre bands around the rear fuselage have been retained, the earlier white rudders have been toned down with an overspray of darker camouflage colours. Just visible on 'Yellow 15', furthest from the camera, is the double horizontal bar symbol adopted by IV./JG 27 as a Gruppe identification. The yellow numerals on these aircraft have been outlined thinly in black.



LEFT: A Bf 109 G-2/trop of JG 53. Clearly visible in front of the supercharger intake is the air cleaner fitted to tropicalised versions of the aircraft. This air cleaner consisted of two Delbag air filter units and two switchover flaps which were operated by cable from a hand lever on the left hand side of the cockpit. The Delbag filter units removed impurities from the air by means of a thin coating of oil, and because they soon became choked, they had to be changed or cleaned after every two flights. The cleaning was achieved by dipping the filters in a solvent, such as petrol or paraffin, etc, and allowing them to dry. They were then re-dipped in used engine oil and allowed to drain.

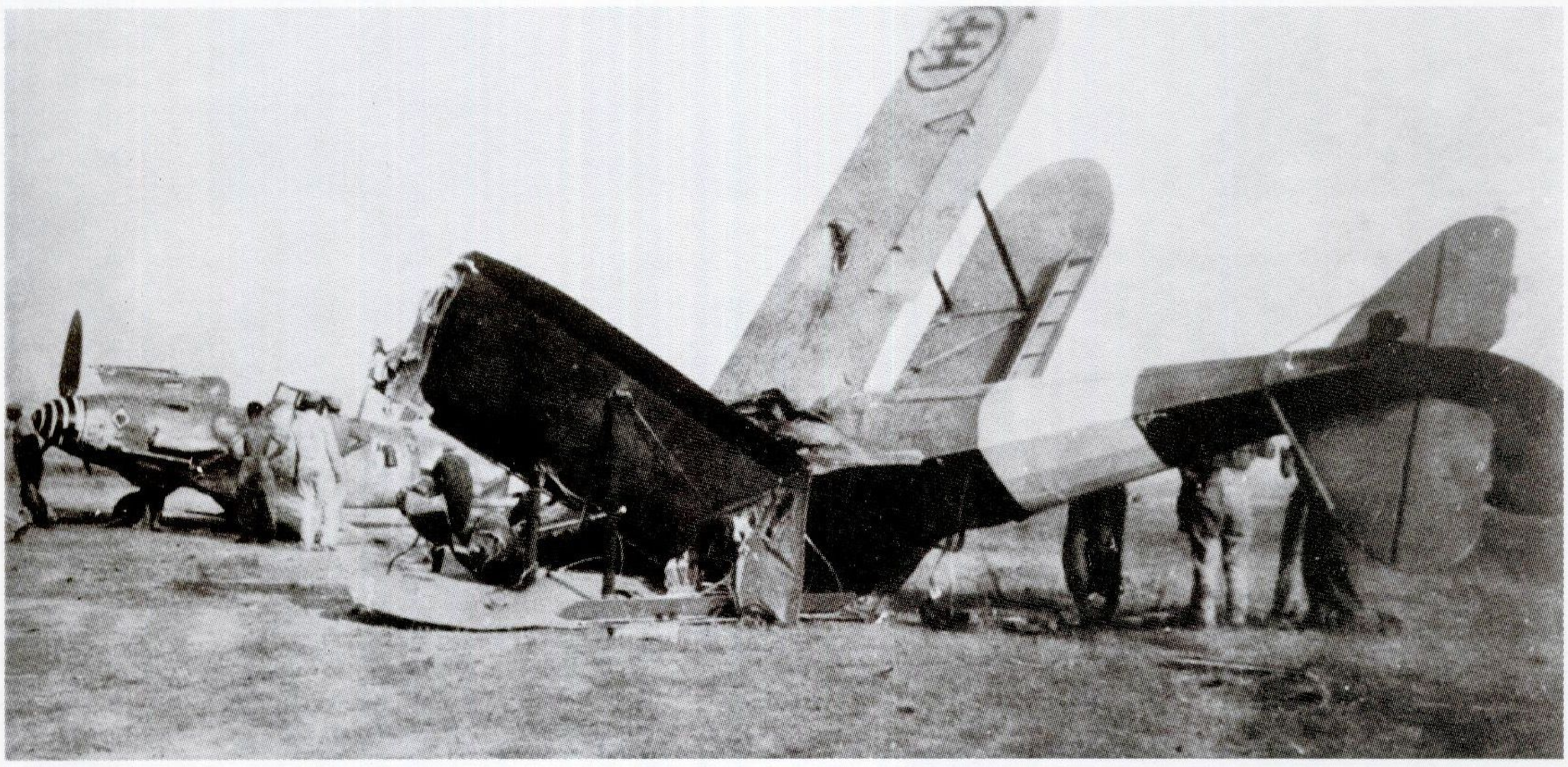


RIGHT: Three highly decorated pilots of JG 53 photographed at Catania in late June 1943. On the left is Ritterkreuzträger Lt. Herbert Broennle, who became Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 53 on 22 June 1943, but was killed as early as 4 July when his engine seized over Catania airfield and his aircraft dived into the ground. At the time of his death he had been credited with 57 victories while flying with JG 54 in the East, and after transferring to 2./JG 53, added one B-17 to his tally before he was killed. Eichenlaubträger Hptm. Friedrich-Karl Müller, in the centre, became Kommandeur of I./JG 53 in November 1942 and stayed with the Geschwader, sometimes as acting Kommodore, until February 1944, later becoming Kommodore of JG 3. He was killed in a crash in May 1944. Oblt. Fritz Dinger, on the right, was killed during an Allied attack on his airfield on 27 July 1943 when he was struck in the head by a fragment of bomb casing.



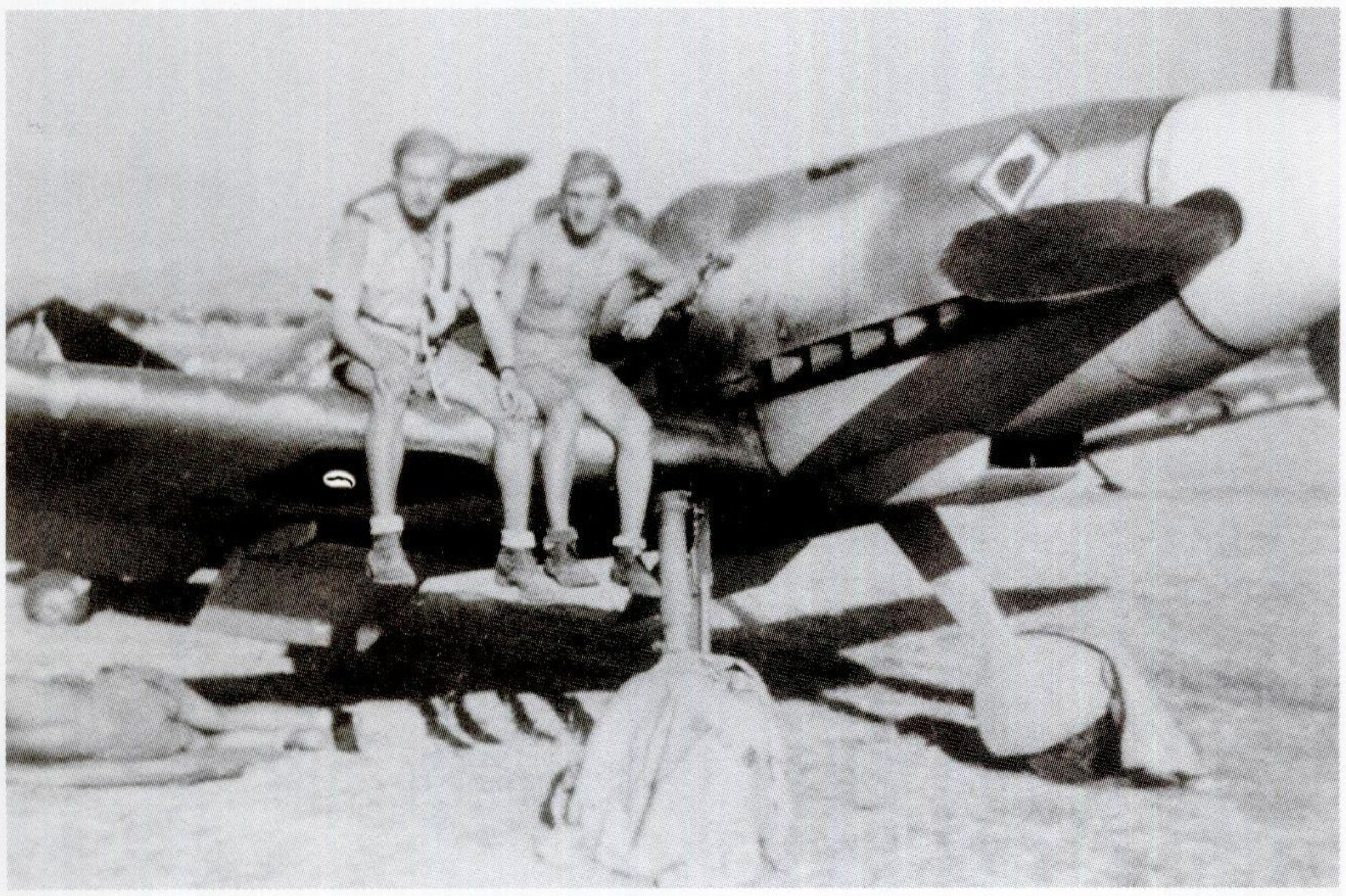
LEFT: Uffz. Hans Kosinowski of 8./JG 77 preparing to take off from Chilivani. This pilot was a member of the Heer until May 1941 when he trained as a pilot and eventually joined III./JG 77 in June 1943. On 7 September 1943 he took off in a Bf 109 G-6 'Black 3' accompanied by another aircraft to carry out a visual-reconnaissance flight to the area of Bizerta and Tunis and observe the build-up of Allied invasion craft. However, both aircraft were shot down by P-38s and Kosinowski became a PoW. Note that the aircraft shown here, 'Black 1' is one of the machines previously flown by JG 53 and although it has been hastily repainted with a new fuselage number, it retains JG 53's 'Pik As' badge on the cowling.

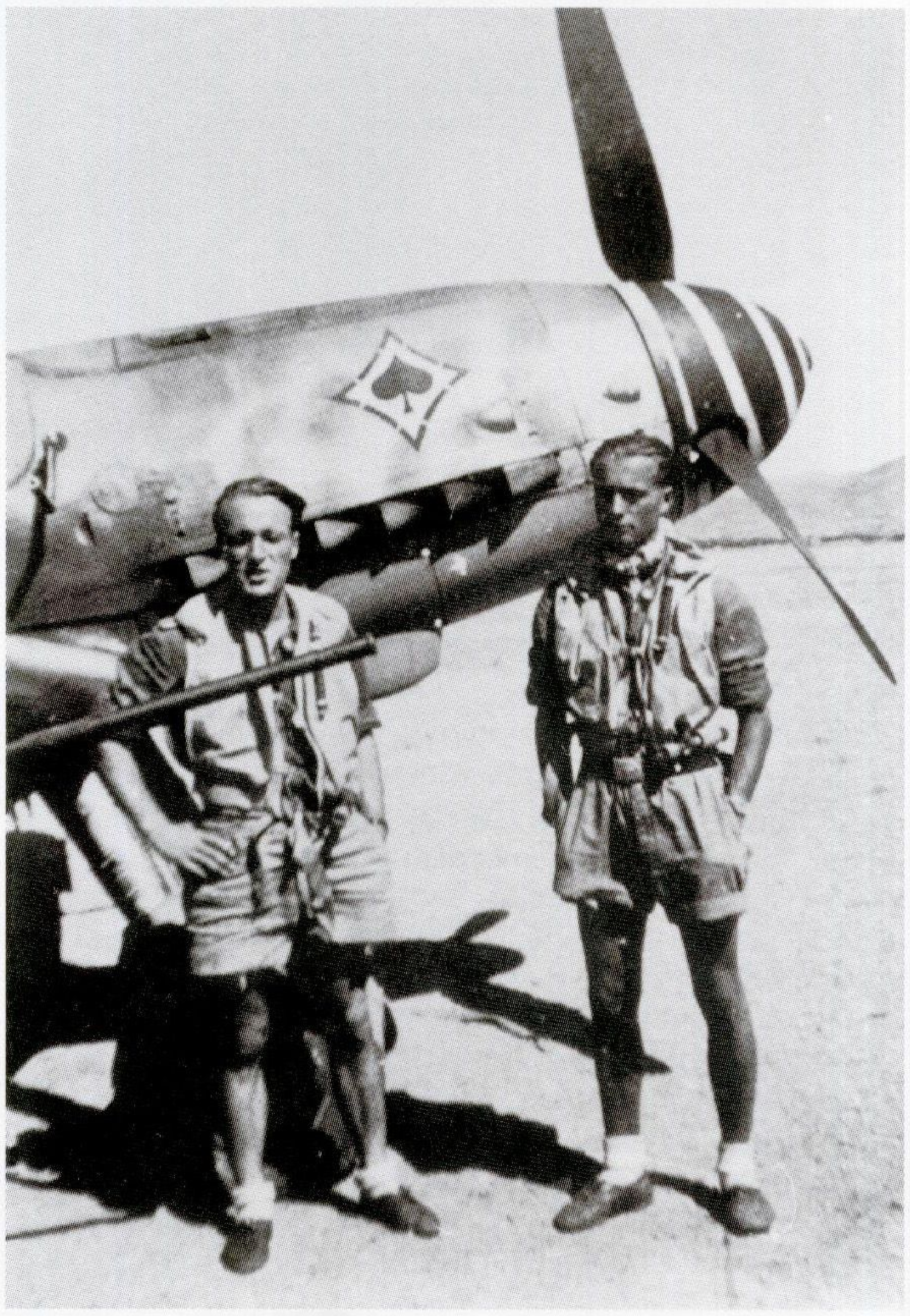
BELOW: On 6 July 1943, an Italian biplane collided with a Bf 109 G of 9./JG 77 at Chilivani. This photograph records the incident and shows the Bf 109 G, 'Yellow 14', in the background. The damage sustained by the Bf 109 was sufficient for it to be declared a write-off.

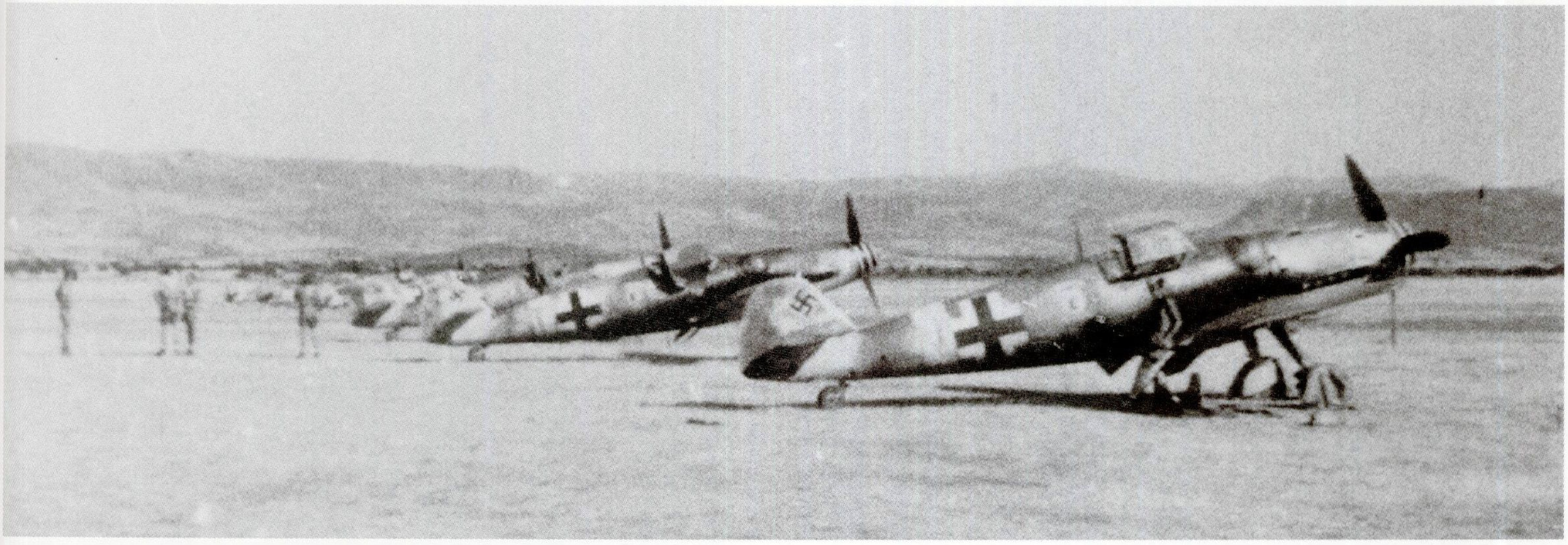


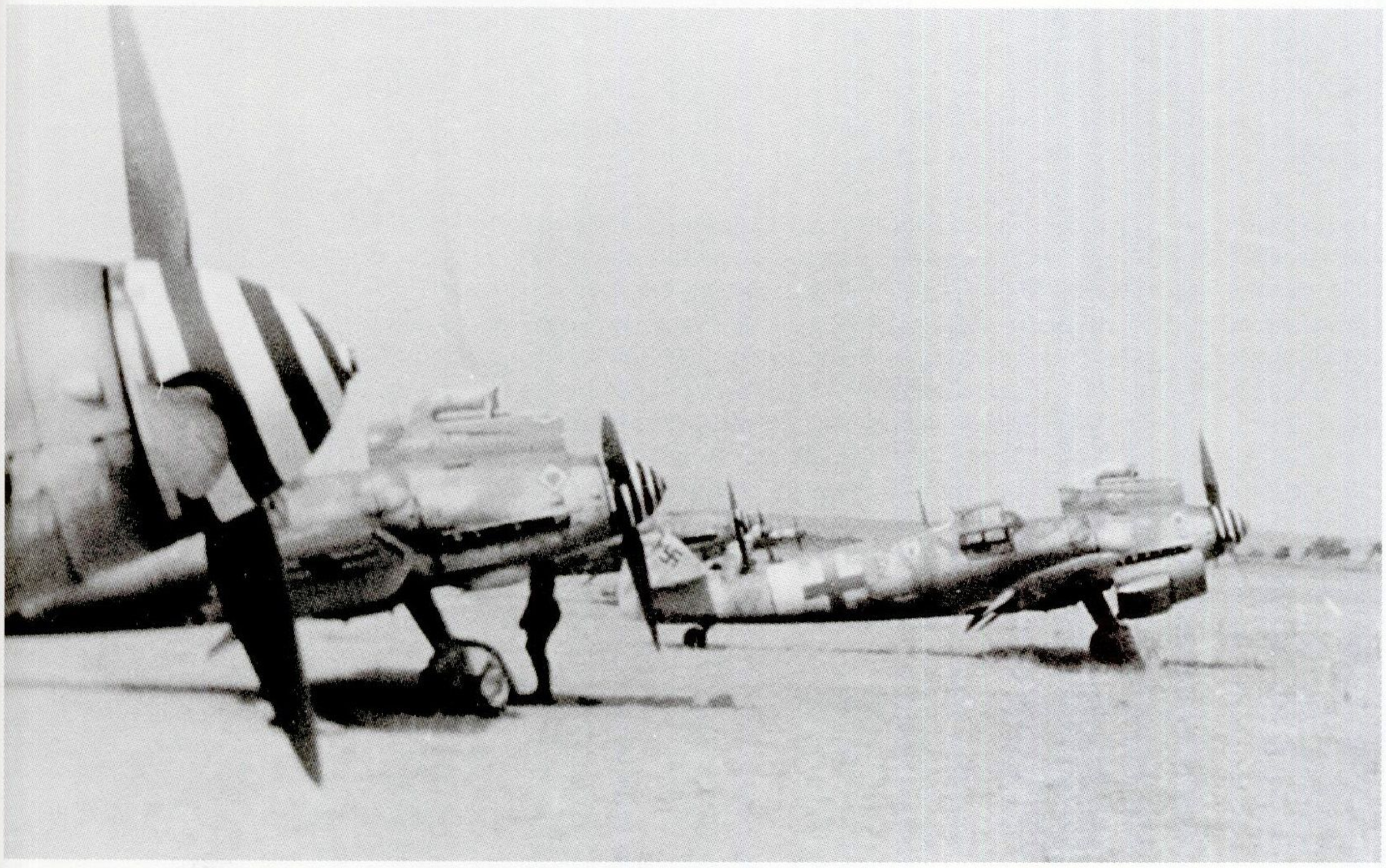
BELOW: Uffz. Otto Köster, on the left, and Uffz. Helmut Rosenberg, both of III./JG 77, a few days after the Gruppe had transferred from Tunisia, with one of the aircraft taken over from JG 53 which is still wearing the 'Pik As' badge. Köster had trained as a Stuka pilot but joined 8./JG 77 in September 1942. He was reported missing during a reconnaissance mission to the coast of North Africa on 24 July 1943.

BELOW: 'Yellow 10' of 9./JG 77, seen here at Chilivani in 1943, was flown by Uffz. Wilhelm Skreba, seen seated on the wing of his aircraft with one of the unit's mechanics. Skreba was credited with eight victories achieved in Africa, Italy and Rumania before he was posted missing on 25 August 1944. Note the plain white spinner on this machine and the Geschwader's 'Herz As' emblem on the engine cowling. Also shown are some of the covers which were provided for each aircraft to protect it from sand and rain when parked in the open. Each set of covers comprised one for the engine cowling, one for the pilot's cabin, one for the propeller hub and one each for the port and starboard oleo recesses under the wings. In addition, covers were also provided for each undercarriage leg and wheel, though here only those for the wheels are in place.

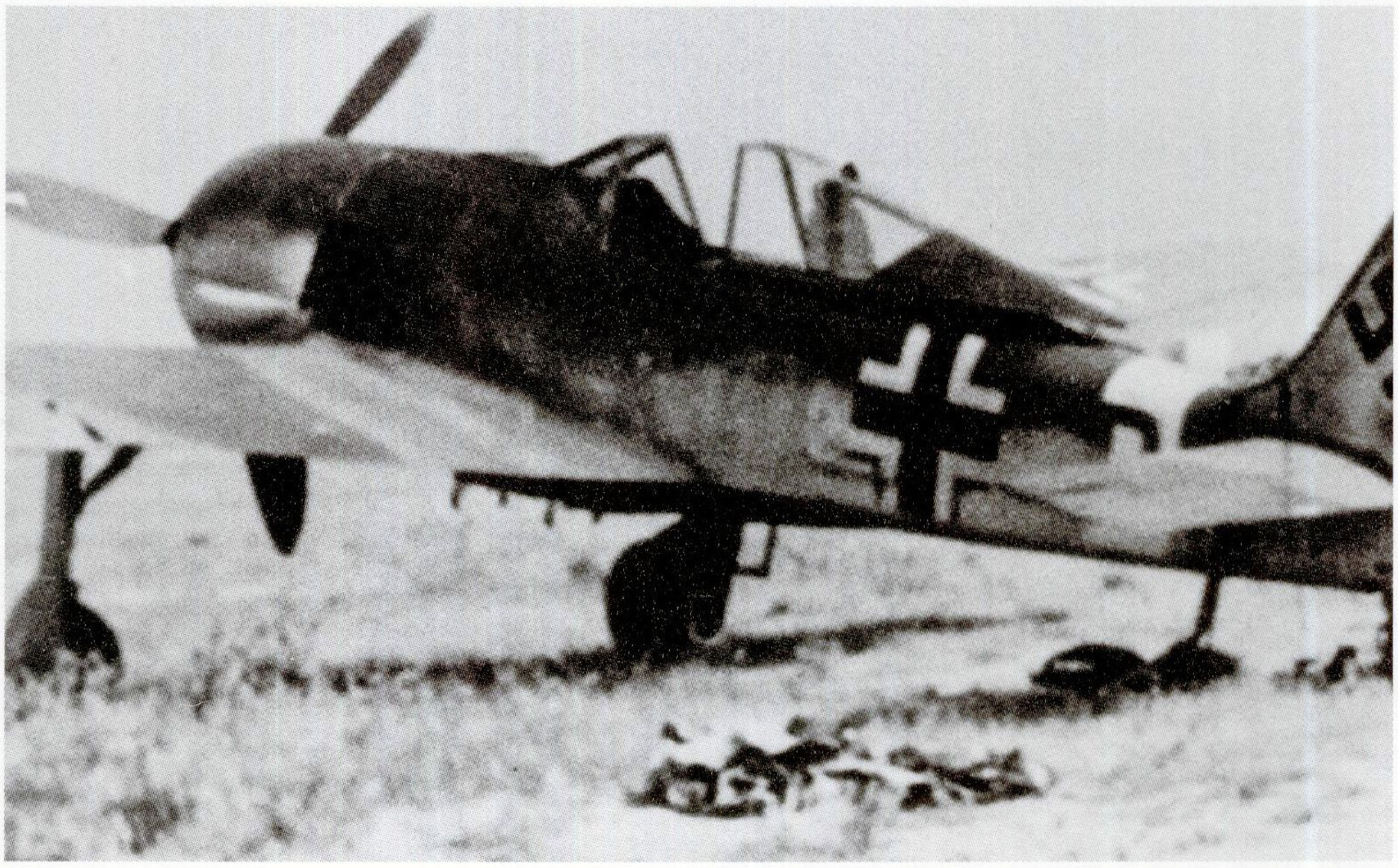




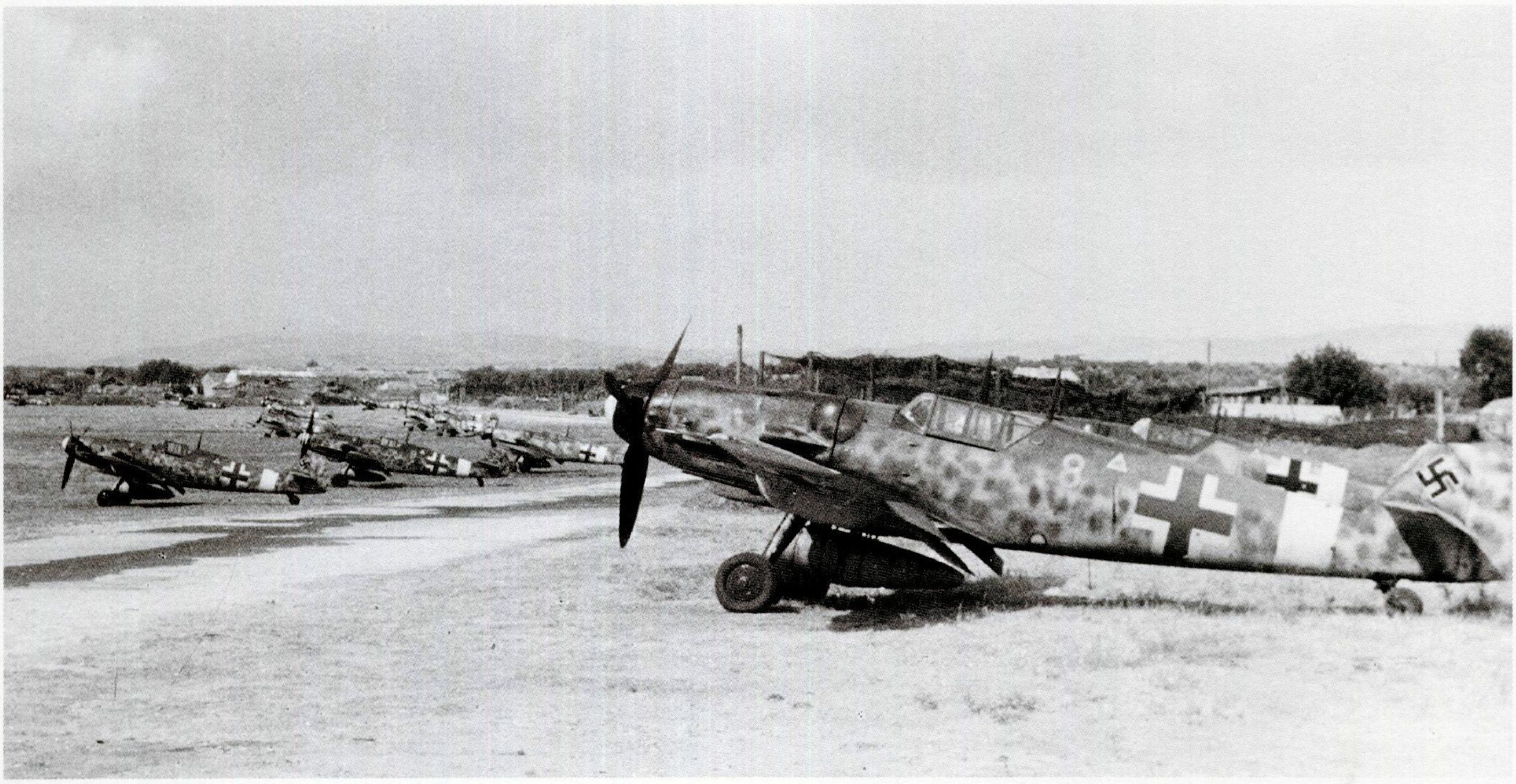




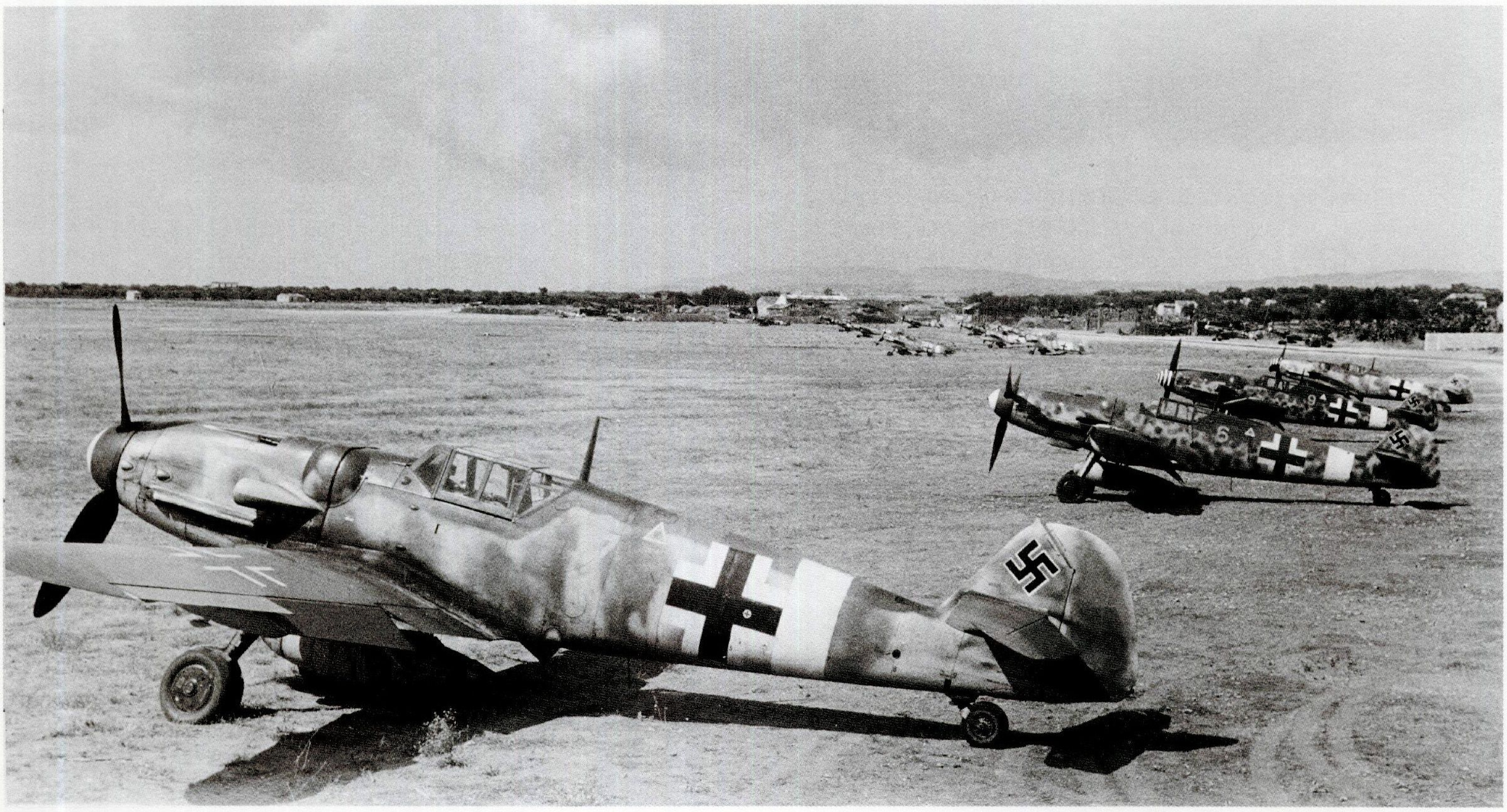
ABOVE AND LEFT: Following the evacuation of Tunisia, the Germans had no means of knowing where the next blow would fall, Sicily, Greece, Crete, Sardinia and the Italian mainland all being possibilities. In one of the most successful deception operations ever mounted in warfare, a corpse dressed as an officer misled the Abwehr into believing that a junior staff officer of the Royal Marines had been killed in an aircraft accident while on his way to Allied HQ in North Africa to plan the invasion of Sardinia. Attached to the corpse, which was launched into the sea off Spain from a Royal Navy submarine, were forged documents designed to suggest that plans for an attack on Sicily were decoys from the real target, Sardinia. As a result of this deception, significant ground forces were in Sardinia when the invasion of Sicily took place. These photographs show Bf 109 Gs from III./JG 77 on the airfield at Chilivani, in Sardinia. (*LEFT*) The aircraft in the centre of this view is 'Black 12'. Note from this and other photographs on the following pages the widespread use of the spiral spinner.



RIGHT: Another unit held in reserve in Sardinia was I./Sch.G 2. This Gruppe, which had previously fought in North Africa with Bf 109s, was trained on the Fw 190 in Italy and later moved to Milis, in Sardinia, where this photograph was taken. As with other units, the personnel had to contend with almost unbearable heat, added to which there was an outbreak of malaria and the airfields were subjected to numerous Allied bombing attacks, but this Gruppe saw no action with the Fw 190 in the Mediterranean area and left the theatre in August 1943 for further training in Austria. In October, the unit was redesignated I./SG 10 and was subsequently engaged in many of the key battles on the Eastern Front.



ABOVE AND BELOW: In mid-May 1943, I./JG 77, then based at Chinisia in Sicily, returned to Germany to be re-equipped with new Bf 109 G-6s. The Gruppe returned to Sicily on 8 June and for the next four weeks was stationed at Sciacca. While the Gruppe had been away, Sciacca had been heavily bombed on 20 May resulting in many casualties among the ground personnel and serious damage to motor transport. As the weight of the Allied bombing offensive shifted from Sardinia to Sicily, airfields on Sicily were subjected to 114 raids from May up to the Allied invasion on 9 July, after which most of the attacks switched to airfields in Italy. These photographs of I./JG 77's new Bf109s are believed to have been taken at Sciacca at the end of June 1943. Closest to the camera is 'Yellow 7' of 3. Staffel which, while retaining the standard 74/75/76 grey colours of the period, displays large patches of 74 and 75 on the fuselage. Behind this aircraft is 'Yellow 6' which, although in the same colours, has a much finer mottled pattern on the fuselage giving a markedly different appearance. The probable explanation for the widely differing finishes is quite simply that these machines were produced in different factories and reflect the style and taste of the painters. Note also the different widths and positions of the white theatre bands around the rear fuselages of these machines.



Operation 'Husky'

Operation 'Husky', the Allied landings in Sicily, began in poor weather on the morning of 10 July 1943. Because of the poor weather, the Italians were not expecting the landings which therefore achieved complete surprise and were effected with little difficulty. At that time the Axis possessed about 1,250 aircraft, but only half of these were German and only 320 were operational. The USAAF and RAF outnumbered the *Luftwaffe* and with around 5,000 first-line aircraft at their disposal, possessed a theoretical advantage of four to one which immediately allowed them to establish an enormous air umbrella over the invasion area.

LEFT: After the first wave of Allied troops had landed in Sicily, the conditions which had hampered the German defence of the island also delayed the disembarkation of the heavy equipment required to support the troops already fighting inland. Here, stores are being unloaded by hand while British troops and naval parties clear boulders and prepare a beach roadway so that lorries, jeeps guns, tanks and other heavy equipment can be landed.

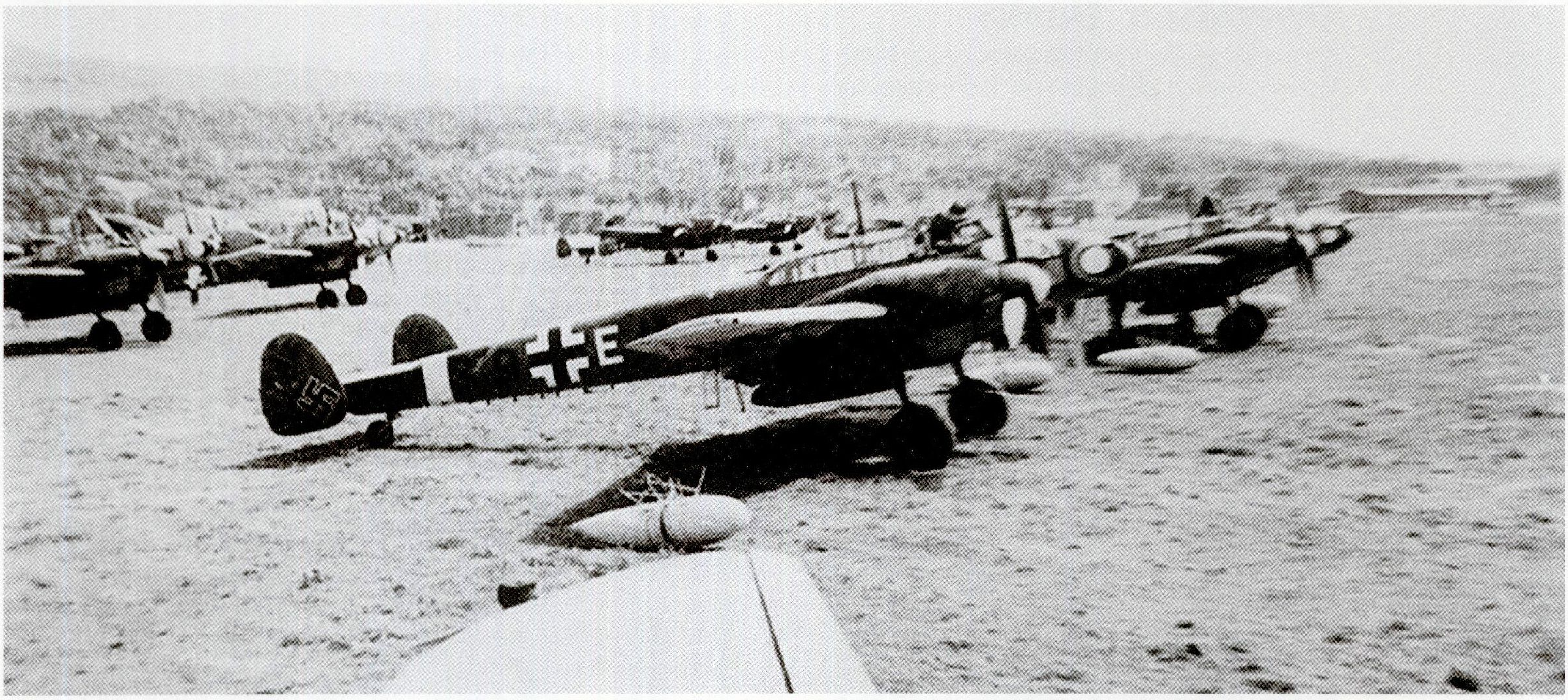
When the invasion began, the pilots of I./JG 77 were in Northern Italy preparing to ferry new aircraft to the south. Units present in Sicily or available for rapid intervention over the island, were the entire JG 53, II./JG 77, II./JG 27 and, rushed in from Sardinia, II./JG 51, so that of the 320 German aircraft available, only 130 were Bf 109s. Additional units in the area were III./JG 77, which remained in Sardinia, and IV./JG 3 which operated from the Italian mainland.

Quite apart from the Allied air superiority, the German fighters were hampered by the diversity of the missions they were ordered to carry out. These included reconnaissance of the landing beaches; escorting the Bf 110 heavy fighters of II./ZG 1, the *'Wespengeschwader'* ; escorting the Fw 190 fighter-bombers of II./Sch.G 2 during their attacks against troop concentrations and shipping off the Sicilian coasts; the aerial defence of the airfields, and the strafing of enemy columns. Regarding the latter, the Bf 109 was not suited to such missions due to its vulnerability to return fire and these operations resulted in the loss of many aircraft in the days ahead.

However, although material losses during the first few days of 'Husky' were heavy, pilot casualties were surprisingly few, the most serious being *Ofw.* Herbert Rollwage of 5./JG 53 who was severely wounded near San Pietro after having shot down a "Ryan" and a P-38 and who would spend some months in hospital before returning to his unit. The following day II./JG 53 had to be pulled out of Sicily and went back to Germany to re-equip, leaving its surviving aircraft behind to be passed on to other units.

Throughout the period of Operation 'Husky', IV./JG 3 lost a total of five pilots killed in action, three of them during an engagement on the 12th, but claims were made by *Lt.* Otto Wessling, who claimed three victories, and by *Oblt.* Gustav Frielinghaus who claimed two. Also on the 12th, the last elements of I./JG 53 left Sicily when the *Gruppe* evacuated to Calabria. That day also, II./JG 77 fought mainly over Gela, losing its *Kommandeur, Hptm.* Siegfried Freytag, who was shot down in a dogfight with P-38s but baled out wounded. He was sent to hospital and was therefore lost to his unit for a time.

The Italian Army in Sicily had been strengthened with German divisions and, although these had mounted vigorous counterattacks on 11 and 12 July, the Allies were able to advance against this strengthening resistance until 18 August when the British Eighth Army was held in front of Catania. The

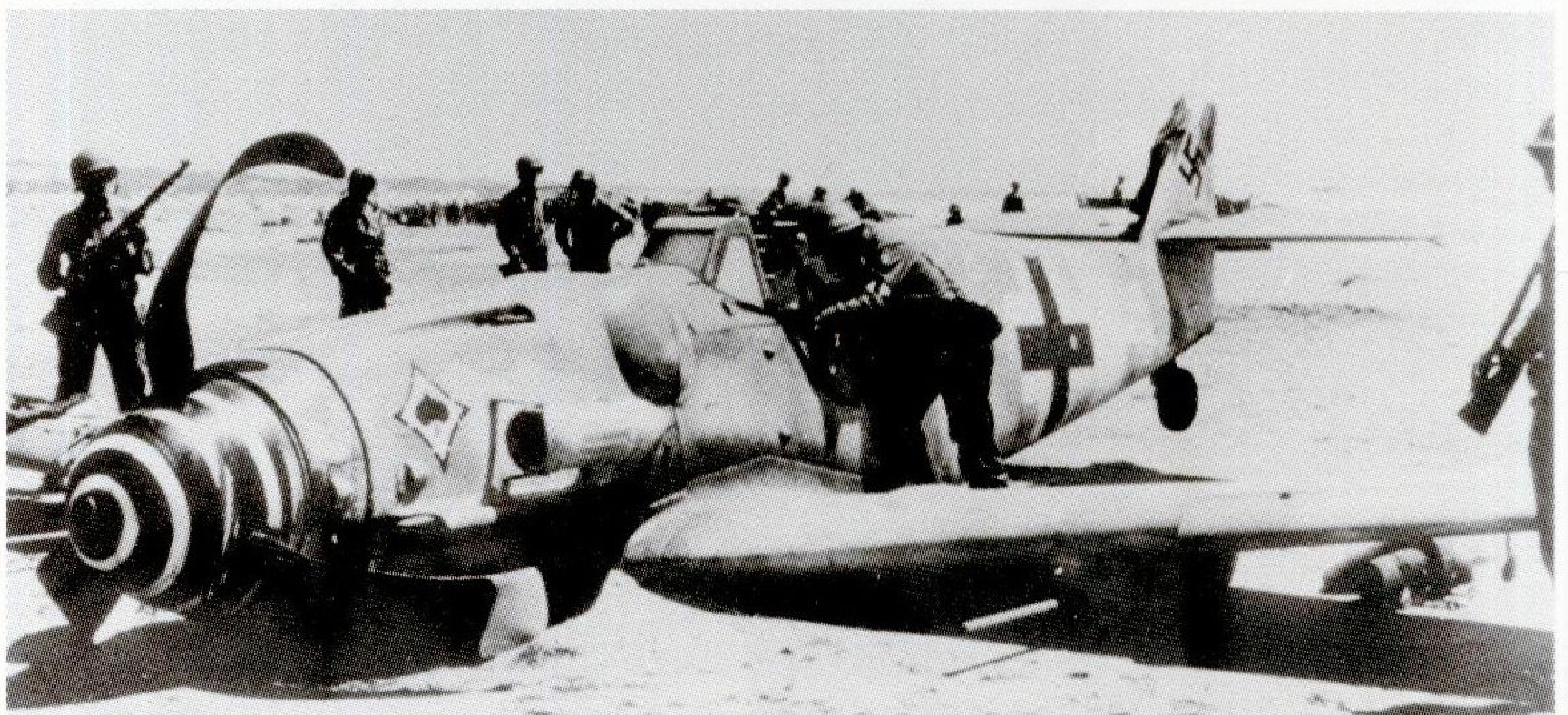


ABOVE: Bf 110 heavy fighters of II./ZG 1 at Trapani. These aircraft carried out strafing attacks against Allied shipping and landing places in Sicily, during which missions they were escorted by Bf 109s.

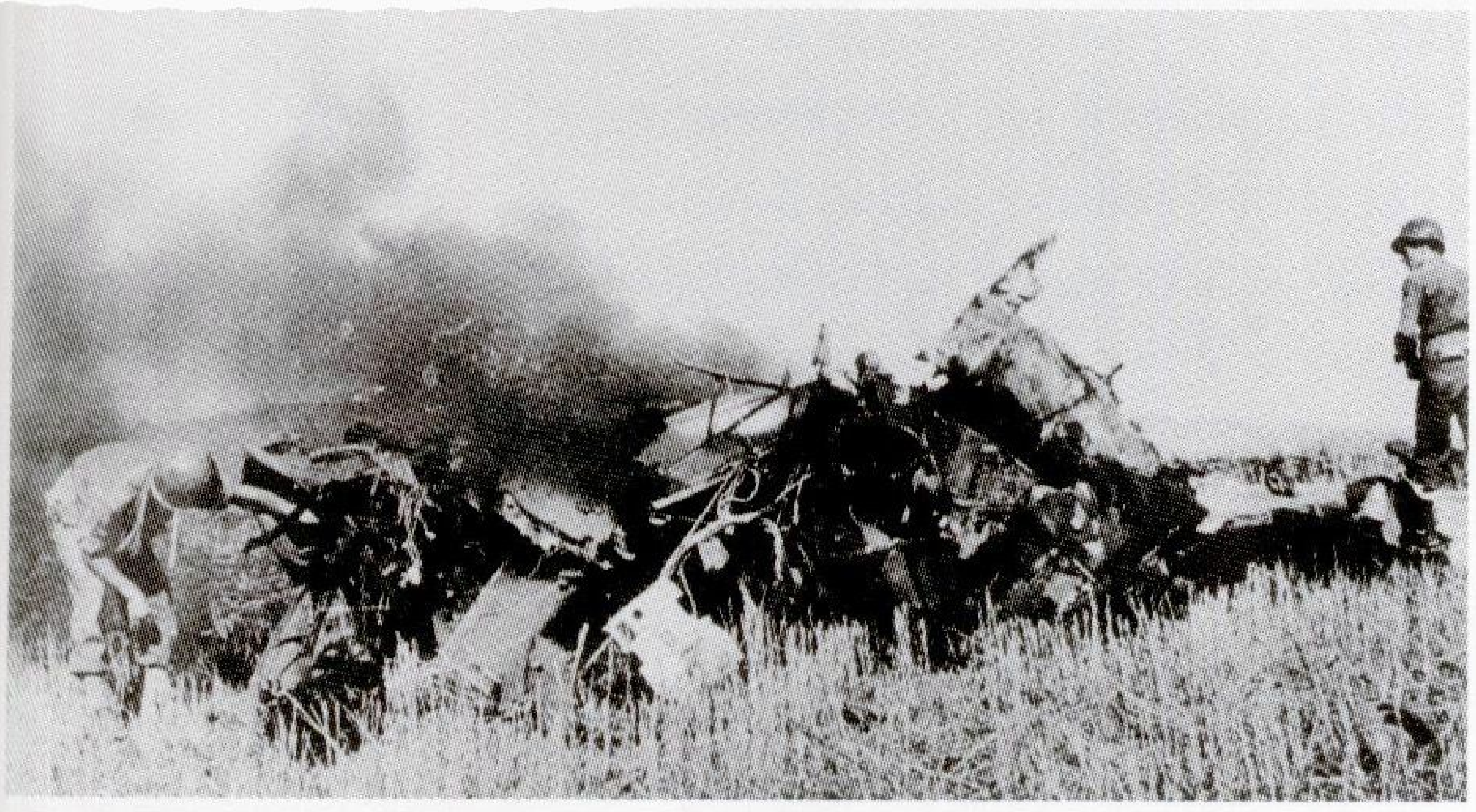
US forces, however, continued to advance towards the north-west until they reached the north coast and turned east towards Messina. Since Sicily was now considered too exposed, it was decided that the remaining units should be evacuated and II./JG 51, which had claimed only one or two victories over Sicily and lost two pilots, probably because its pilots were exhausted by the numerous missions flown, handed over its remaining airworthy Bf 109s, together with a few pilots, to II./JG 27 stationed at San Vito di Normanni. All machines that were unable to take off were then destroyed with explosives and the remnants of II./JG 51 departed for Neubiberg, where they were to rest and refit. The *Gruppe* did not return to the Mediterranean theatre until five months later. Similarly, all II./JG 77's non-airworthy aircraft were destroyed at Trapani, and when I./JG 77 returned from the north with new aircraft, instead of landing on Sicily, its pilots were diverted to the Calabrian airfield of Vibo Valentia, where the *Kommandeur*, *Major* Bär, was slightly injured in a collision while landing.

There were also other casualties among the *Experten* on the 13th. Flying in from Sardinia, two *Staffeln* of III./JG 77 arrived at Catania to support the local units and *Hptm*. Emil Omert, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 77, was strafing Allied troops when he was shot down in a surprise attack by a P-38. Omert succeeded in crash-landing in his own lines but was wounded and temporarily replaced by another *'Herz As'* veteran, *Oblt*. Helmut Hänsel. Two other aircraft from 8./JG 77 and their pilots were also lost and JG 53 suffered some ill fortune when one of its best

BELOW: Early in the invasion of Sicily, US troops discovered this Bf 109 G-6/R6 'Kanonenboot' of II./JG 53 which had made an emergency landing on the beach. However, due to incomplete Luftwaffe records, the circumstances of this loss and the fate of the pilot are not known.



LEFT: Hptm. Siegfried Freytag, the Kommandeur of II./JG 77, one of the daredevils of JG 77, was shot down and wounded over Sicily on 12 July 1943. He had 49 victories when he was awarded the Ritterkreuz on 3 July 1942, but ended the war with 102. After the war he was unable to return to his home town of Danzig as it had become part of Soviet-occupied Poland, and he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, with which he served for many years. Freytag died on 1 June 2003.



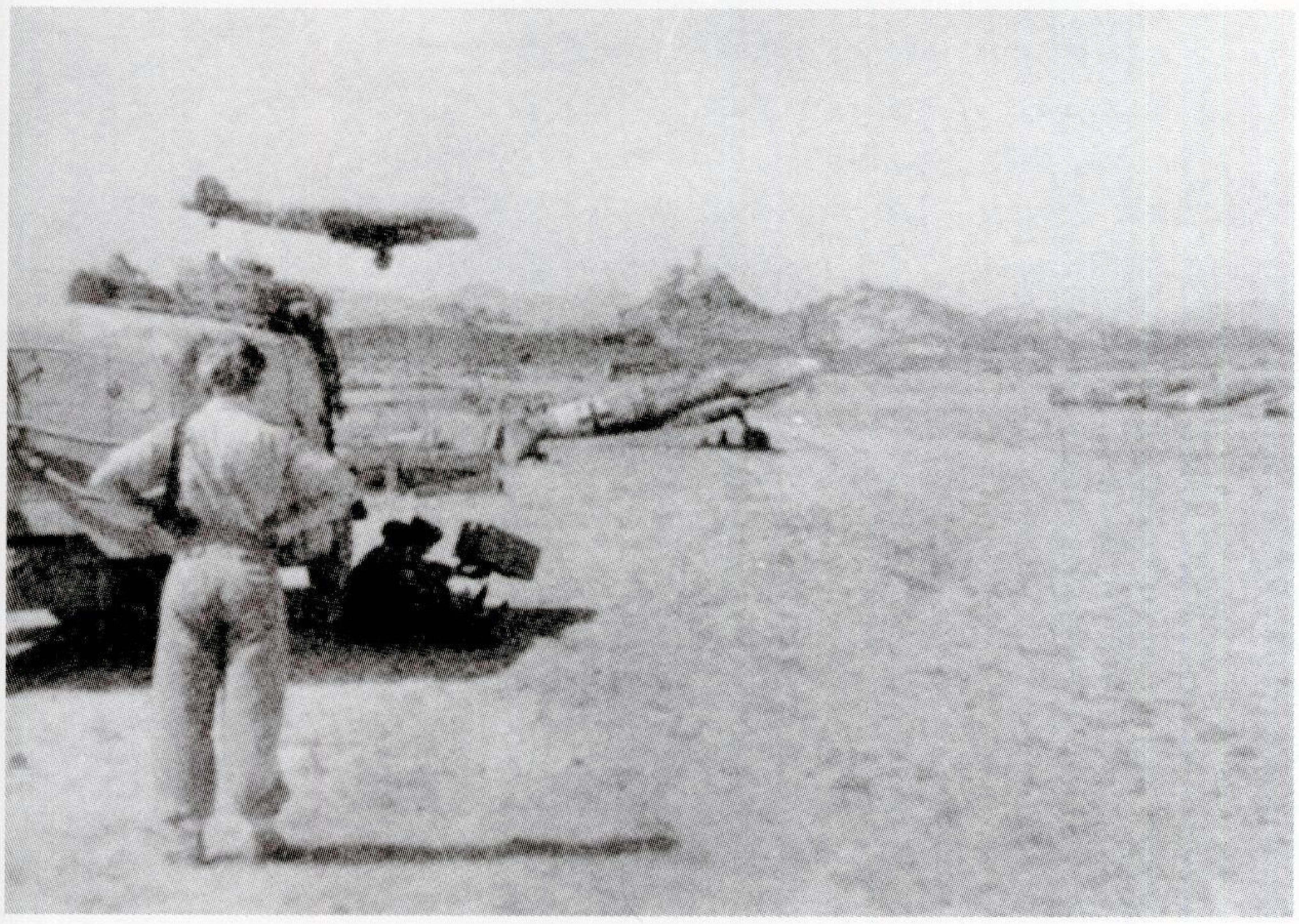
ABOVE: American soldiers looking over the still-smouldering remains of a German fighter shot down near Gela on 11 July 1943.

Knight's Cross holders, *Oblt.* Hans Röhrig, the commanding officer of 9./JG 53 who had been credited with 75 victories, was killed during an engagement with a Spitfire. He was succeeded by another *Ritterkreuzträger*, *Oblt.* Franz Barten, from 7./JG 53. To round off what had already been a disastrous day, the Allies had discovered the secret German airfields at Crotone and Vibo Valentia in southern Italy which were both heavily bombed and many aircraft were destroyed on the ground.

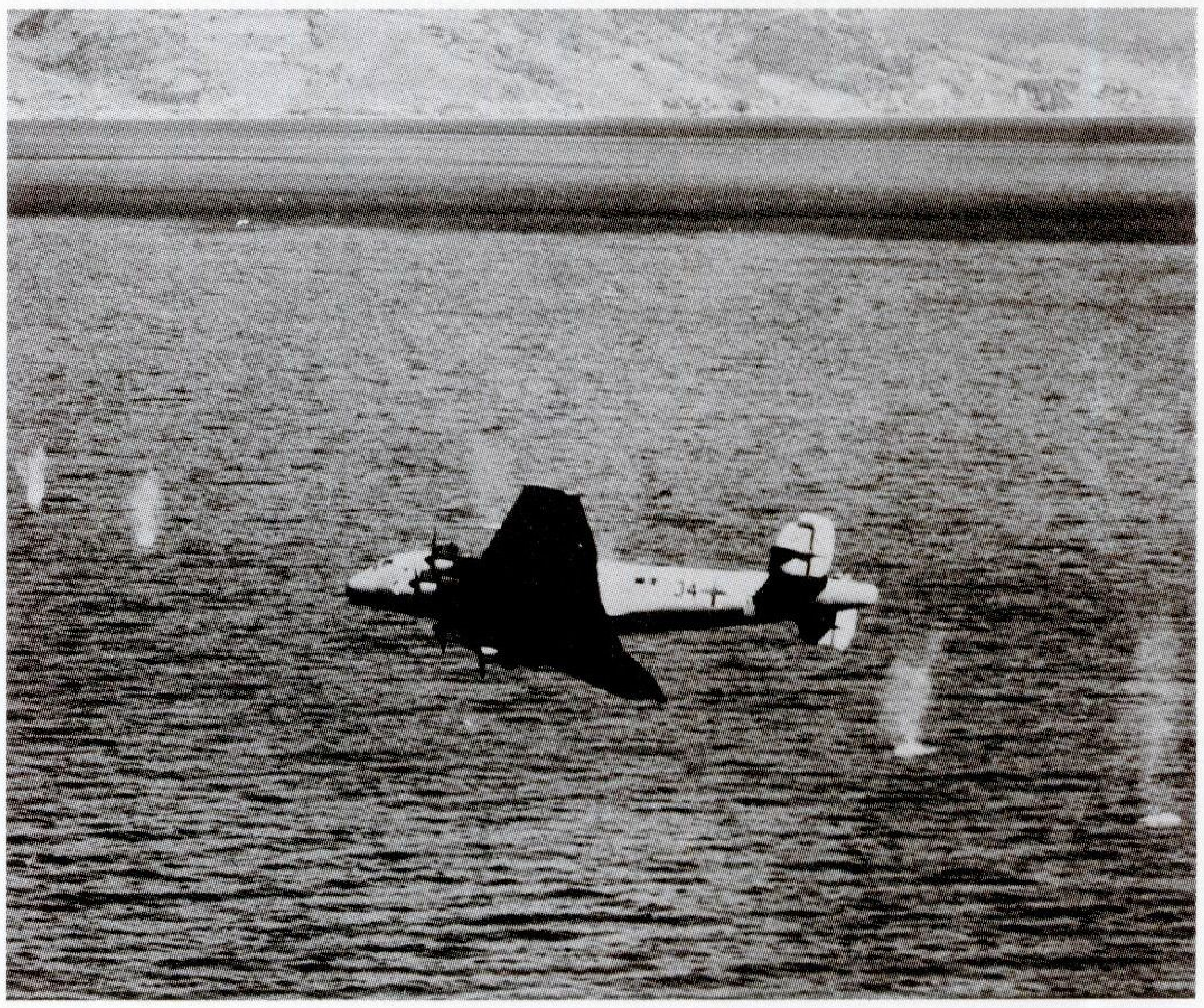
On the 14th, III./JG 77 temporarily lost another *Experte* when the serious and quiet *Ofw.* Johann Pichler of 7./JG 77 was injured. Pichler had shot down his 37th *Luftsieg*, a B-26, during a sweep over Sicily, when the *Schwarm* in which he was flying was bounced from above by a number of Spitfires. Pichler's Bf 109 G-6, 'White 3', was hit and so badly damaged that it became totally uncontrollable. After struggling to jettison the canopy, Pichler clambered from his seat and baled out, but as he left the aircraft, then in a high-speed dive, his right heel struck the fin. He landed safely by parachute in no man's land north-west of Lentini where he was rescued by two infantrymen who took him to their regimental command post. Unable to walk, he was evacuated to the Strait of Messina and, despite the turmoil and disorder of the retreat, he was safely evacuated by hospital ship to Italy and thence to his native Bavaria. Pichler's injury proved serious; it put him out of action for the next six months, and although he returned to the *Staffel* as early as 18 August 1943, he was unable to fly again until January 1944.

16 July proved to be another disastrous day. To eliminate the problem of German fighters strafing ground targets, the Allied air forces again attacked Vibo Valentia in force and succeeded in destroying around 80 German fighters on the ground. In this single attack, I./JG 53 and I./JG 77 lost all their aircraft. Other *Gruppen* were in action but lost such valuable pilots as *Oblt.* Franz Daspelgruber, the *Staffelkapitän* of 10./JG 3, who was killed over Taranto in an engagement with a B-17. He was replaced by the *Ritterkreuzträger Lt.* Otto Wessling. Meanwhile another valuable pilot, *Hptm.* Ernst Börngen, the *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 27, was severely wounded near Bari after claiming a B-24 as his 30th victory. He was replaced by *Oblt.* Walter Otte, formerly *Staffelkapitän* of 11./JG 26, who took command of the unit, but only for a very short time. The 16th also saw the dispersal of JG 77 and, while its III. *Gruppe* remained at Chilivani, I./JG 77 transferred to Bottricello, near Crotone, and *Stab* and II./JG 77 moved to Camigliatello, 20 km west of Cosenza.

Although still in the process of re-equipping, III./JG 27 nevertheless diverted its 8. *Staffel* to Brindisi to support the Axis actions over Sicily. When equipped with auxiliary tanks, its Bf 109s could operate as far as Catania and on the 15th, *Lt.* Wolf Ettel, the *Staffelkapitän*, claimed a Spitfire near Mount Etna. The next day Ettel claimed three victories, a Spitfire and two B-24s, as his 122nd, 123rd and 124th. During the following days the Messerschmitts were often engaged in ground-strafing sorties, and on the 17th, Ettel and three comrades were killed while attacking British positions near Lake Lentini.



BELOW: A Ju 290 landing at Chilivani. This aircraft probably belonged to Lufttransport-staffel 290, a special transport unit which had been formed in January 1943 and was employed mainly on supply flights to German outposts in Sardinia, Corsica and other islands in the central Mediterranean.

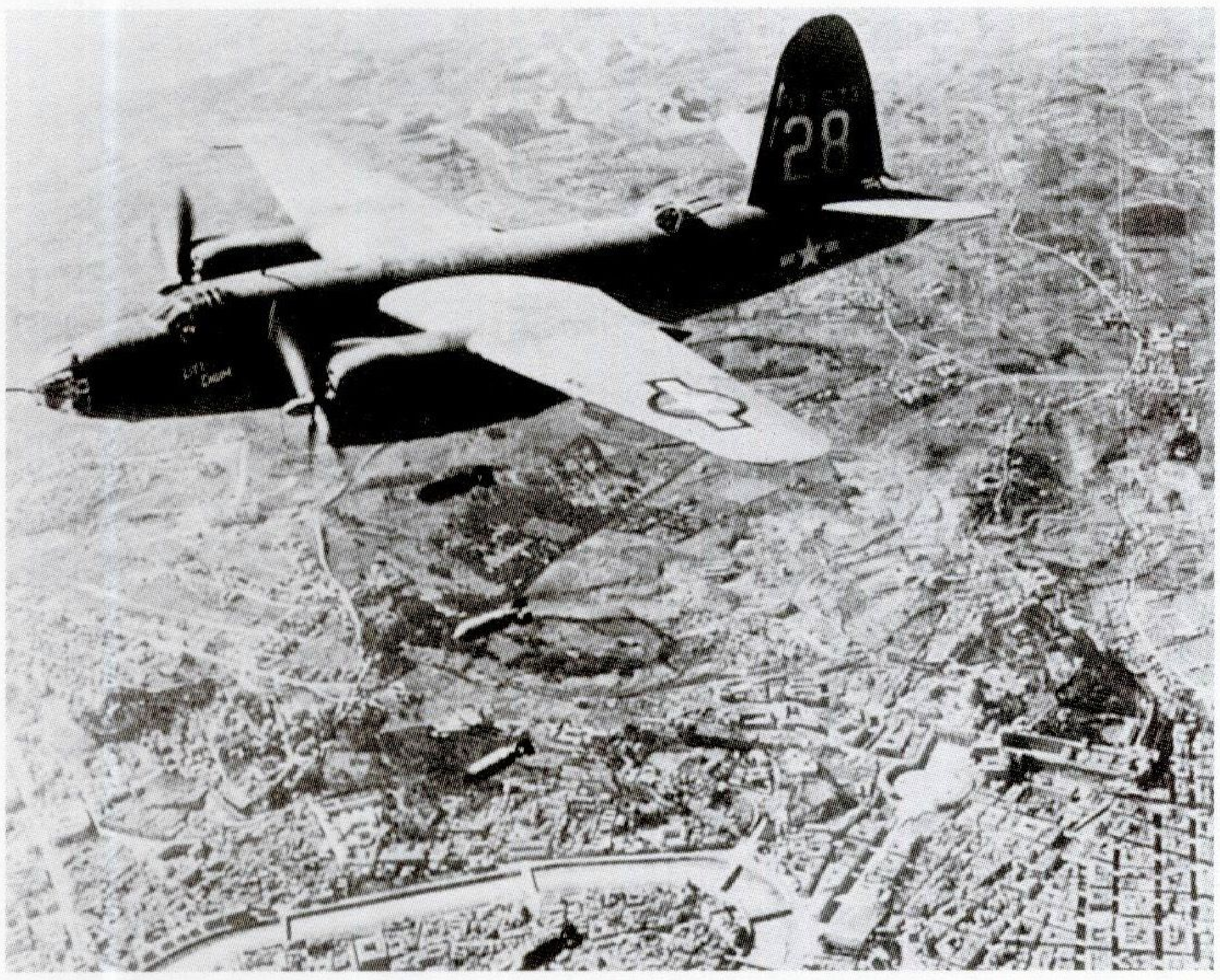


BELOW: Despite its unit designation Lufttransportstaffel 290 operated Ju 90 as well as Ju 290 aircraft. This Ju 90 coded J4+JH, W.Nr.0007, seen under attack off Corsica on 23 July 1943, had taken off from Pisa and was flying to Borgo in Corsica when, shortly before reaching the island, it was intercepted near Bastia by a B-26 from 328 Wing RAF, during which this photograph was taken. Although hit by machine gun fire from the B-26, the Junkers was not seriously damaged, but as it approached Corsica it was mistaken for a B-24 on account of its four engines and twin tails. Light flak on the island opened fire and hit the right outer engine, causing the machine to lose height, but the pilot, Ofw. Hans-Georg Boldt, succeeded in crash-landing in shallow water close to the beach at Bastia.

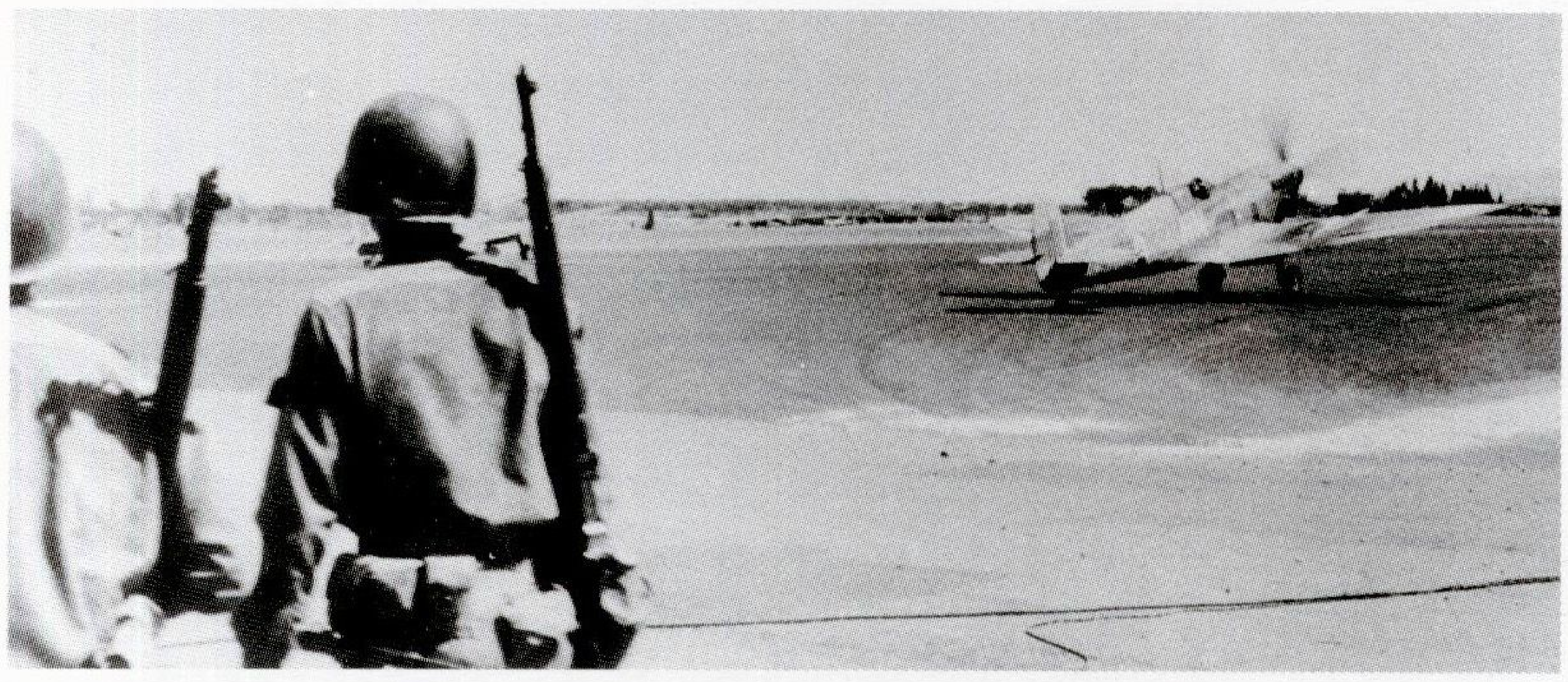
The port and airfield at Palermo, on Sicily's north coast, were captured by US forces on 22 July, and the following day the mainland airfield at Leverano was severely attacked and many aircraft of all types were set on fire on the ground. In the fighter units, serious casualties included *Lt.* Otto Wessling of 10./JG 3 who was wounded by bomb splinters, while 5./JG 27 also suffered a severe loss when *Oblt.* Walter Otte, its *Staffelführer* since only the 16th, was killed when his aircraft crashed near Cosenza.

Disposition of German Fighter Gruppen, 24 July 1943

Calabria	I./JG 77	based at Bottricello, 10 km west of Crotone
	II./JG 77	Camigliatello, 20 km west of Cosenza
	II./JG 53	Scalea
Apulia	IV./JG 3	based at Leverano
	II./JG 27	Vito di Normanni
Naples/Foggia Area	I./JG 53	based near Foggia
	III./JG 53	based at Capua
Sardinia	III./JG 77	based at Chilivani
	III./JG 27	Brindisi, but in the process of leaving Italy



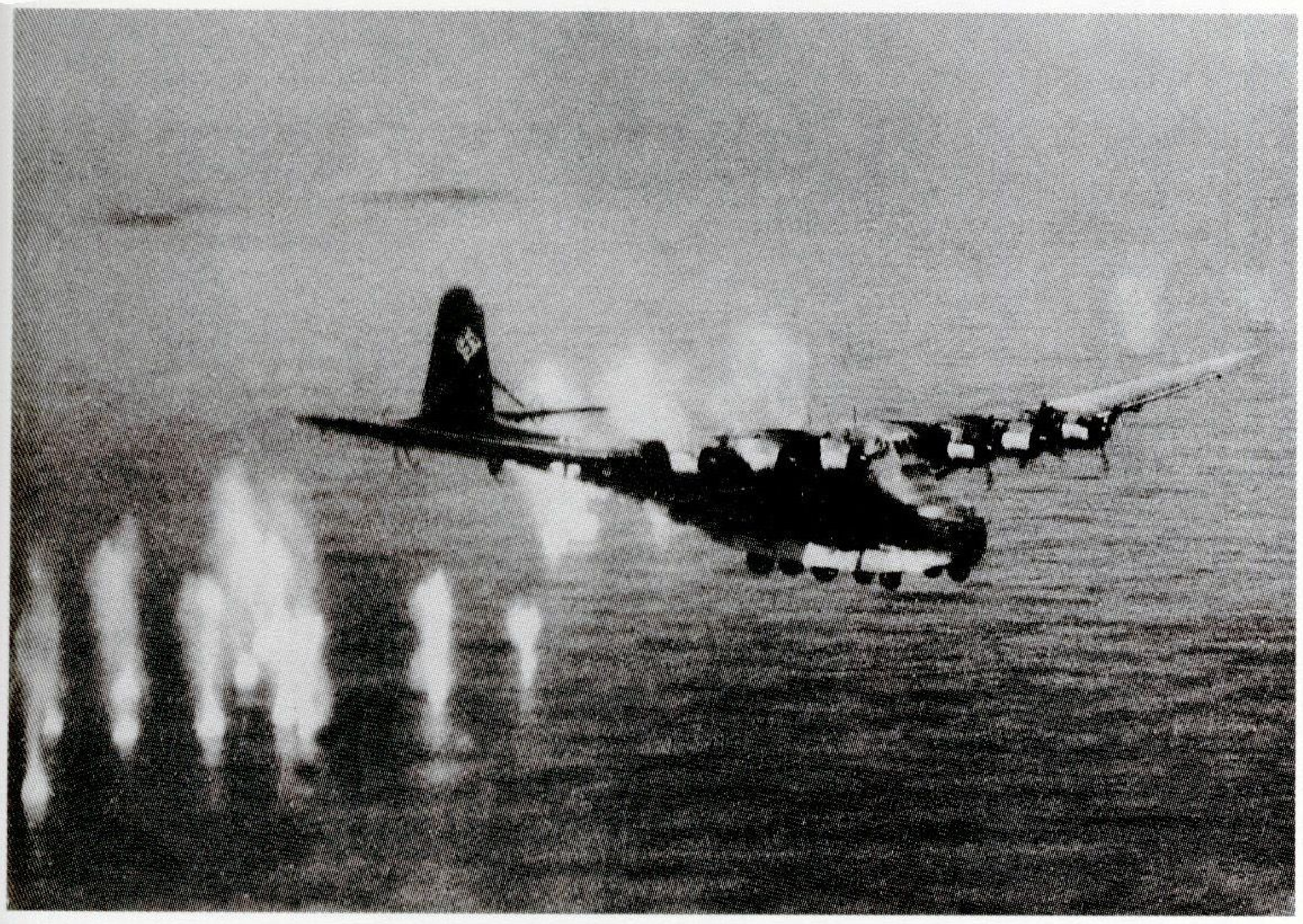
ABOVE: On 19 July 1943 the Italian capital experienced its first bombing raid when the important marshalling yards at San Lorenzo and Littorio in Rome were attacked. This provoked exceptional fighter activity, with Rome control ordering four formations to intercept attacking aircraft. The defences, however, were so surprised by the attack and overwhelmed by the number of Allied aircraft involved, that some bomber formations were reported only when they were over the target. At the height of the attack considerable disorganisation was evident and vectoring was very erratic. In this photograph showing a B-26 over Rome, the Vatican City may be seen in the lower right-hand corner of the picture.



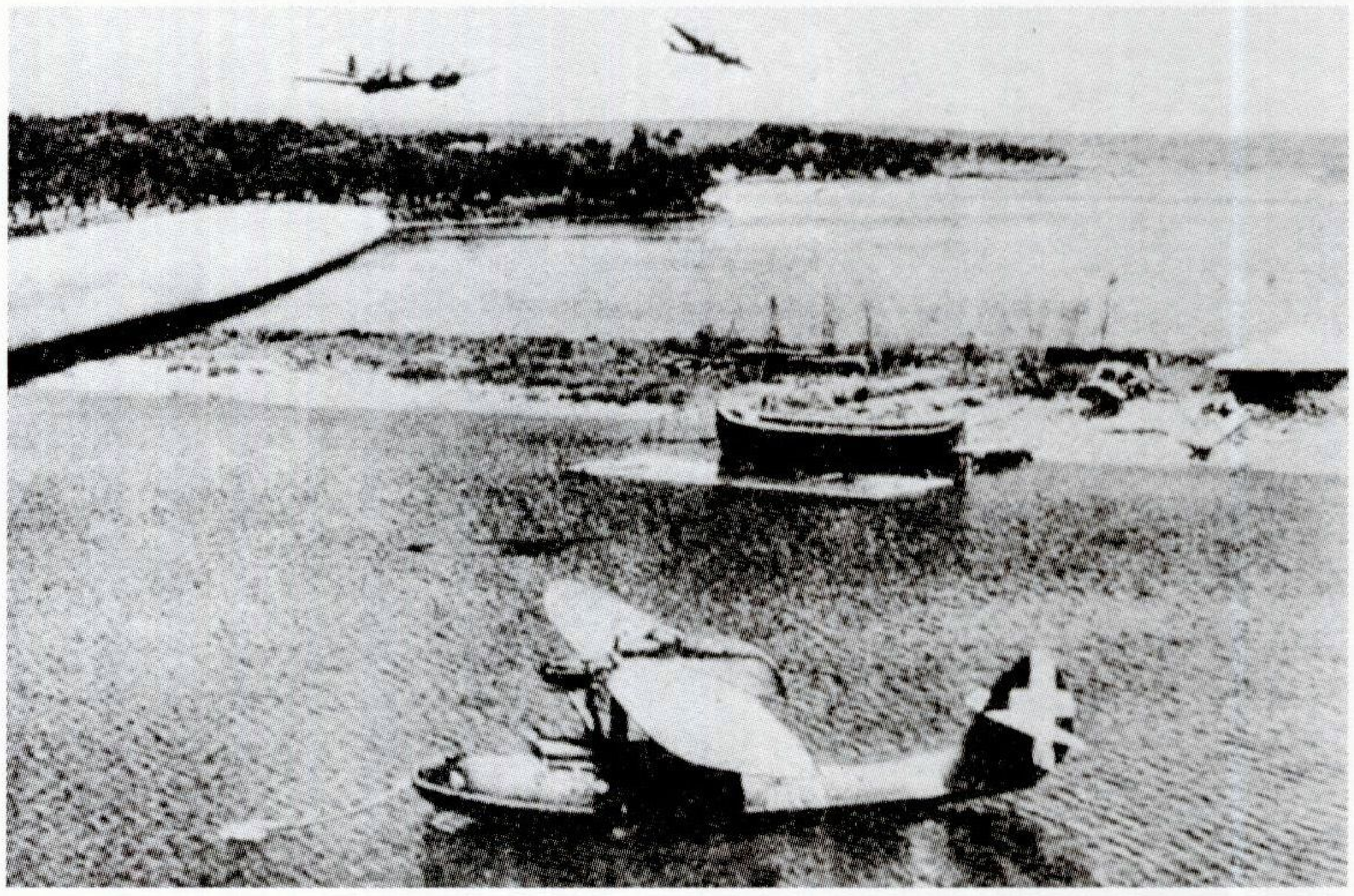
ABOVE: Airfields in Sicily captured by the Allies were quickly put to their own use. This photograph, taken on 24 July, shows American soldiers watching RAF Spitfires of 93 Squadron take off from Comiso.

25 July was a busy day for I./JG 77, the only *Gruppe* of the *Geschwader* still engaged near Sicily, as III./JG 77 was still based in Sardinia and the pilots of II./JG 77 appear to have been occupied in ferrying replacement aircraft from the north. In the first operation of the day, a new and inexperienced pilot was killed in action and another crash-landed. The day's third mission was to provide escort for the Ju 52/3m transport aircraft of I./TG 1, but the German formation was intercepted near Milazzo by Spitfires of No. 322 Wing which shot down four of the escort fighters. Only one pilot was lost but it proved to be the *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JG 77, *Oblt.* Edgar Berres. An experienced veteran, Berres had begun the war with I.(*J*)/LG 2, later redesignated I./JG 77, and had claimed 11 victories over Malta the preceding year. Posted missing and presumed killed, he was later awarded a posthumous *Ritterkreuz* in recognition of his 52 victories. Another pilot, *Oblt.* Gerhard Strasen, shot down a Spitfire on 25 July but was himself shot down and wounded shortly afterwards. Strasen, of *Stab*/JG 77, had been a close friend of Joachim Müncheberg, the former *Kommodore* of JG 77, and had flown as his wingman in North Africa on 23 March 1943, the day Müncheberg was killed. Such was the lack of experienced personnel that a pilot from SKG 10, *Lt.* Erich Michno, was for a short time appointed *Staffelführer* of 1./JG 77.

By this time, the poor resistance and, sometimes, mass surrender of Italian troops in Sicily had confirmed German fears regarding Italian morale. A conference between Hitler and Mussolini on 19 July had not been a success, and Mussolini was shaken to learn that Allied aircraft had mounted their first



LEFT: On 30 July 1943,a formation of six Me 323s from II./TG 5 based in the south of France was ordered to fly to Rome, meeting their fighter escort on the way. This aircraft, VM+IV, W.Nr. 1274, was loaded with a towing vehicle for heavy anti-aircraft guns, three personnel carriers and six tons of ammunition, plus the normal eight man crew and the four drivers of the vehicles. However, engine trouble delayed the pilot, Obfw. Walter Honig, from taking off and he left half an hour after his comrades. After about one and a half hours, the Me 323 was flying low over the sea near Corsica when it was attacked by a B-26 from 14 Sqn flown, coincidentally, by Wing Commander Maydwell, the same pilot who had earlier shot down the Ju 90 pictured on Page 311. After several attacks which injured all on board, put its defensive armament and two engines out of action and caused smoke to appear from another, Honig set the Me 323 down in a bumpy crash-landing near Barcaggio, on Corsica. After making a low pass but without attacking again, the B-26 flew away, and Honig and his crew and passengers received help from a local fisherman and Italian soldiers before being taken to hospital. In an interesting sequel to this incident, Honig later traced Maydwell as the pilot who had flown the aircraft that had attacked him 39 years earlier, and in September 1982 they were reunited in Germany where they exchanged mementoes, Honig presenting Maydwell with a propeller tip from his crashed Me 323. This photograph was taken by the co-pilot of the B-26 during the attack.



ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: Hptm. Werner Schroer, Kommandeur of II./JG 27, on the quayside of the Greek island of Rhodes. Greek ports, particularly around mainland Greece, were not always this serene and were frequently attacked by RAF and SAAF Beaufighters, as shown in this photograph (*FAR RIGHT*) of the seaplane base at Prevezva. The II./JG 27 left the Mediterranean theatre at the end of July and returned to Germany where it became another of the units engaged in defending the Reich.

attack on Rome. This air attack and the negative results of the conference destroyed Mussolini's prestige and led directly to his arrest on 25 July by the Italian King and Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who became the new head of the government. Hitler immediately made plans to act, for although the Italians swore to continue fighting alongside the Germans, the *Führer* feared a total Italian collapse and anticipated that German intervention might be necessary to quickly take control of the situation. His fears were indeed justified, for on the 28th, Marshal Badoglio decided to open secret negotiations for terms that would allow Italy to defect to the Allies.

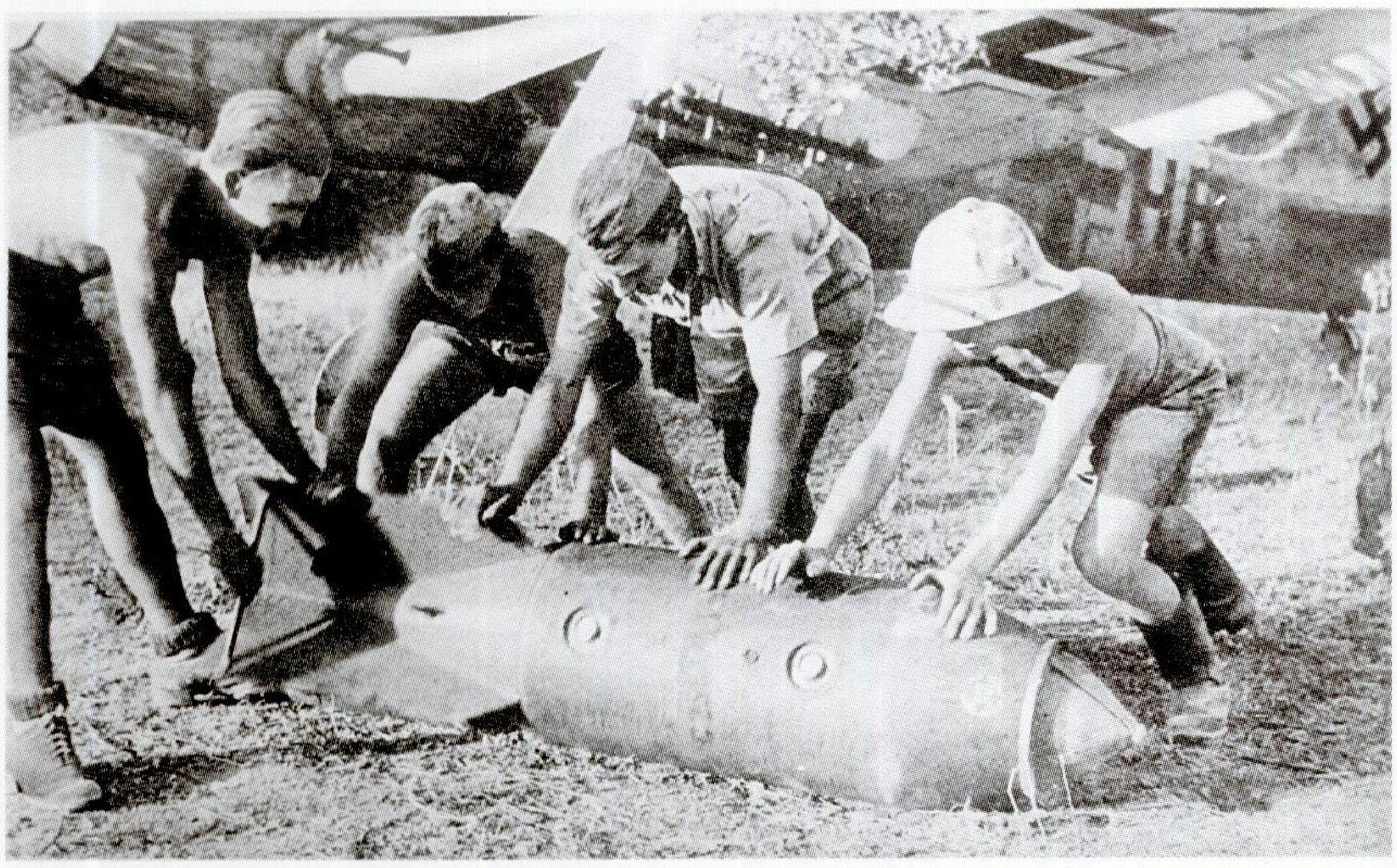
Constantly under pressure from the Allied bombers, the German units continued to be harried from one base to another, and on the 26th, IV./JG 3 left Leverano for San Severo. The following day, Scalea was bombed and *Oblt.* Fritz Dinger, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 53, was killed on the ground. When the raid started, Dinger was safe in a slit trench but, while climbing out to save some personal belongings, he was struck in the head by a bomb splinter. Dinger, a veteran who had flown with 4./JG 53 since the beginning of the war, had been decorated with the *Ritterkreuz* in December 1942 after achieving 49 *Luftsiege*, and at the time of his death had been credited with 67 victories.

On 30 July, the depleted II./JG 27 left Italy for Wiesbaden and the *Gruppe's* remaining Bf 109s were handed over to I./JG 77, with which it had often closely co-operated. Thus II./JG 27 followed III./JG 27 back to Germany, the latter having already left for Götzendorf following a final engagement against B-24s on the 27th.

Although the German fighter force in Italy was now reduced to a mere handful of aircraft, it was still capable of carrying out a few missions and while I./JG 77 mainly provided escort for the Fw 190s of II./SKG 10, II./JG 77 flew *freie Jagd* missions. On 1 August, *Oblt.* Franz Hrdlicka, *Kapitän* of 5./JG 77, suffered an engine problem and crash-landed his Bf 109 G-6 near Cittanova. His aircraft was 85 per cent destroyed but Hrdlicka, at that time credited with 34 victories, escaped unhurt.

BELOW: Hptm. Heinz Bär, the Kommandeur of I./JG 77, who was relieved of his command by Reichsmarschall Göring in August 1943.

LEFT: The chief target for the Fw 190 fighter-bombers of SKG 10 during the battle for Sicily was shipping off the north and east Sicilian coasts. Several attacks were also made against Allied troops and transport in the Cape Orlando area, but these were on a very small scale.

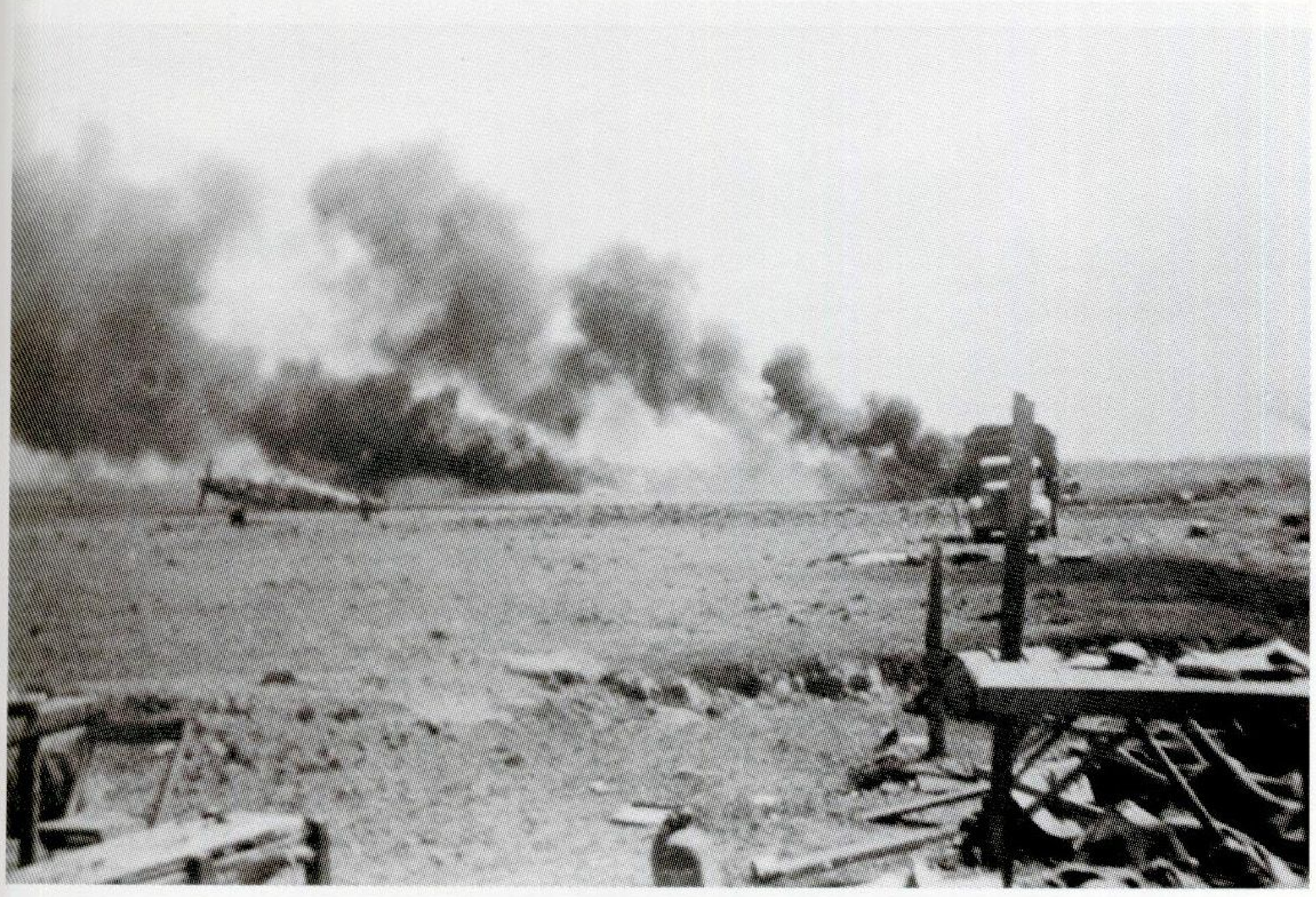


ABOVE: An operational Fw 190, clearly still wearing its Stammkennzeichen, being bombed up. This particular example is believed to be a G-3, probably DP+HR, W.Nr. 160044. Note that the wing racks, which allowed this aircraft to carry drop tanks or bombs, were rarely used in Sicily and Italy and were frequently removed.

BELOW: Lt. Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert of 4./JG 77 was shot down on 13 August 1943 and forced to ditch after an encounter with a P-40. This earlier photograph shows Reinert as a Feldwebel, shortly after he had been awarded the Oak Leaves in October 1942, at which time he had 103 victories. In February 1945, Reinert was decorated with the Swords.

On 6 August, Heinz Bär relinquished command of I./JG 77 and left the area. The official explanation, according to Galland, was that he was suffering from exhaustion, which was certainly true, as Bär had already been in action far longer than had Galland and, after the campaign in the East and the long retreat in Africa, was in dire need of a rest. His personal situation was not helped by the fact that he had twice recently been shot down into the sea and only rescued by chance, events which placed additional stress on Bär's already badly-shaken nerves. Facing overwhelming odds, Bär gallantly tried to protect himself and his pilots from annihilation, but instead of showing sympathy for Bär, who had already done more than enough, Galland betrayed him and he was called to Berlin. There, Bär attempted to explain to Göring that the *Luftwaffe* in the Mediterranean was completely outnumbered, but the *Reichsmarschall* refused to listen to such unpleasant truths, accused Bär of cowardice and relieved him of his command. Galland then had Bär posted to EJG *Süd* as an instructor. He was later succeeded by *Oblt*. Helmut Goedert and *Oblt*. Armin Köhler, both of whom temporarily led I./JG 77 for short periods of time.

Throughout the fighting in Sicily, IV./JG 3, JG 53 and JG 77 had few victories and regularly lost aircraft and pilots, yet although they were unable to influence the inevitable outcome, the fighter forces nonetheless continued to carry out their duty. Although full-scale aerial engagements were rare, they were certainly ferocious, and in one engagement on 13 August, *Lt*. Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert of 4./JG 77 shot down three P-40s, bringing his total to 160 *Luftsiege*. Almost immediately afterwards Reinert was himself shot down in combat with another P-40 and was forced to ditch his Bf 109 off Milazzo. In his subsequent report, Reinert described how he had to fight to free himself from the cockpit and, after swimming for 45 minutes, landed on a beach where he was captured by Italian soldiers who thought he was an enemy pilot. Although he told them he was a German – "*Nix Inglesi. Nix Americani. Tedesco!*" – the Italian soldiers were not convinced and he was held captive. Only after the arrival of some of Reinert's fellow countrymen did the Italians accept he was German and allow him to return to his unit. Five days later, Reinert added two more P-40s to his tally, but by that



ABOVE: Just as in Sicily, German fighter units evacuated to the mainland were subjected to almost continual raids. Here, black smoke rises from the wrecks of several Bf 109s of II./JG 53 which were set on fire during an Allied raid on Cancello on 26 August 1943. The aircraft losses on this occasion were severe with 11 Bf 109s being damaged, of which five were destroyed.

time the fighting on Sicily was officially over, the last Germans on the island having been evacuated the previous day.

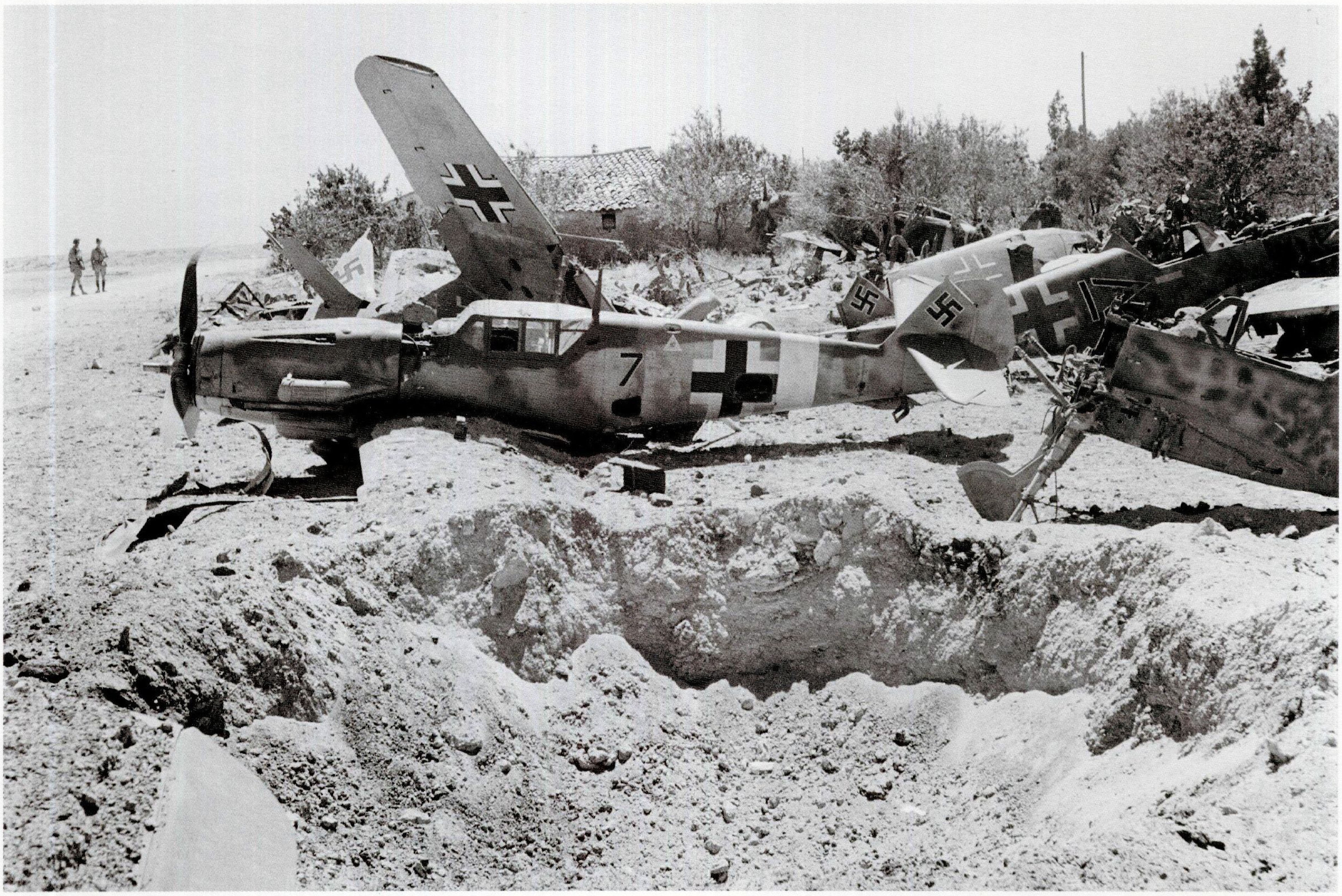
Just as German ground forces were able to evacuate the island in good order and avoid any disastrous losses, so the few day fighter *Gruppen* also saved the majority of their men and machines but lost all their ground support equipment. With the *Jagdgruppen* constantly under pressure, mainly by bombers attacking their airfields and destroying aircraft on the ground, the local *Luftwaffe* forces nevertheless inflicted some losses on the enemy to help the evacuation of the island. True air cover over the Messina straits, however, was provided by the many Flak batteries which put up a protective dome of fire, which proved so effective in shielding the shipping evacuating the island that it became known as the *'Flak Glocke'*, or 'Flak Bell'. Aircraft losses during the battle for Sicily were heavy compared to personnel losses and although IV./JG 3 lost five pilots, JG 53 lost nine pilots killed in action plus one taken prisoner and JG 77 lost 19 either killed or taken prisoner. Many of these were such irreplaceable *Experten* as Dinger, Berrens and Wessling, etc.

An interesting but grim fact to emerge from a study of JG 77 *'Herz As'* losses is that, although new pilots were arriving as replacements, some 84 per cent of them were killed practically on their first war flight. The battle therefore continued to depend on the veterans whose ranks were being inexorably eroded, either by being killed or put temporarily out of action by wounds. Some were wounded so severely that they were unable to return to first-line flying duties and were sent to schools as instructors where they trained more pilots, most of whom would not survive their first combat mission. It therefore proved impossible for the *Jagdwaffe* in this theatre to build an effective force with the 16 per cent of new pilots who survived their first war flight and gained some experience.

Three of the veteran pilots wounded at this time who would either remain in hospital for months before returning to their units or were otherwise unable to return to combat flying were Pichler and Freytag of JG 77 and Rollwage of JG 53. After the losses already suffered in North Africa, the Sicilian campaign was thus a dire warning for the *Luftwaffe* but, to judge from the conduct of Adolf Galland, who had been sent to Sicily to investigate the situation but failed to make a realistic report, it is doubtful if the *Luftwaffe* high command ever fully understood the implications for the future. It certainly failed to appreciate that, for all their courage, the German fighter pilots could do little to change the situation.

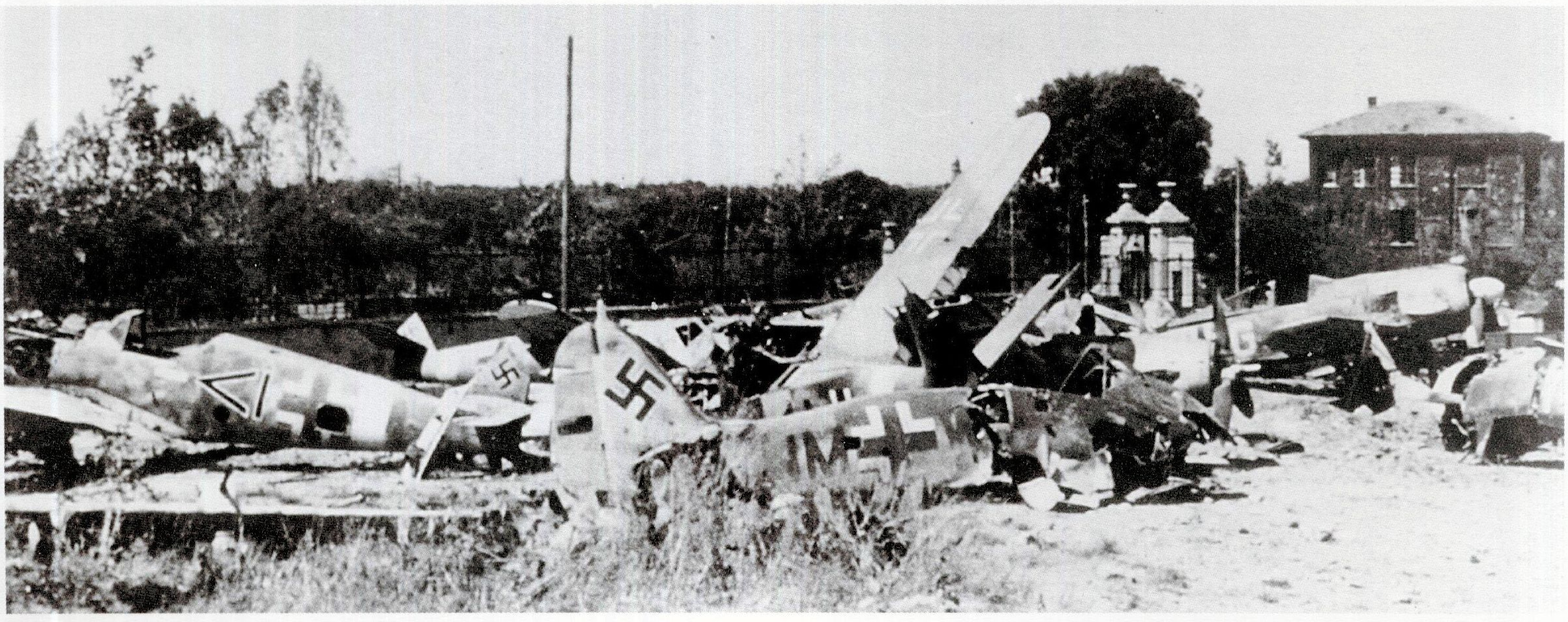
While the fight in the central Mediterranean continued, a short battle occurred further east on 1 August when the USAAF launched Operation 'Tidal Wave', an attack by 168 B-24s from five bombardment groups against the oil installations at Ploesti, in Rumania. Although the bombers were opposed by Rumanian fighters, they were engaged also by the Bf 109 Gs of I./JG 4. On their return journey, the Liberator formations again came under attack, this time from IV./JG 27. Led by *Oblt.* Alfred Burk, *Staffelkapitän* of 11./JG 27, the 'Gustavs' transferred from Greece to Araxos and launched a short attack on the bombers near Cephalonia. For the loss of two Bf 109s and one pilot, IV./JG 27 claimed five victories, Burk himself being credited with his 25th *Luftsieg*. In fact, IV./JG 27 succeeded in destroying four B-24s and severely damaging a fifth.

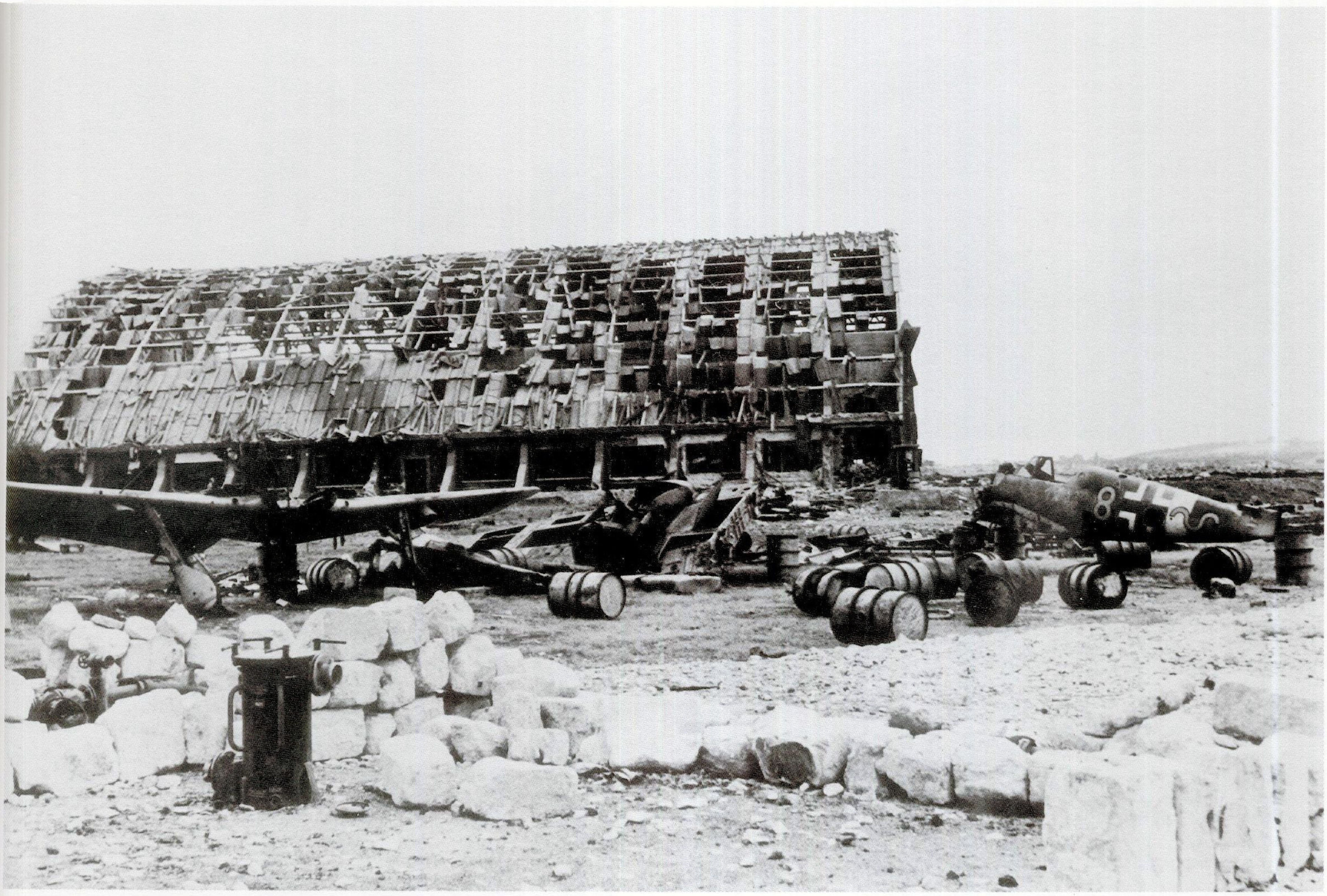
BELOW: The installations at Ploesti after Operation 'Tidal Wave', the attack by USAAF B-24s on 1 August 1943.



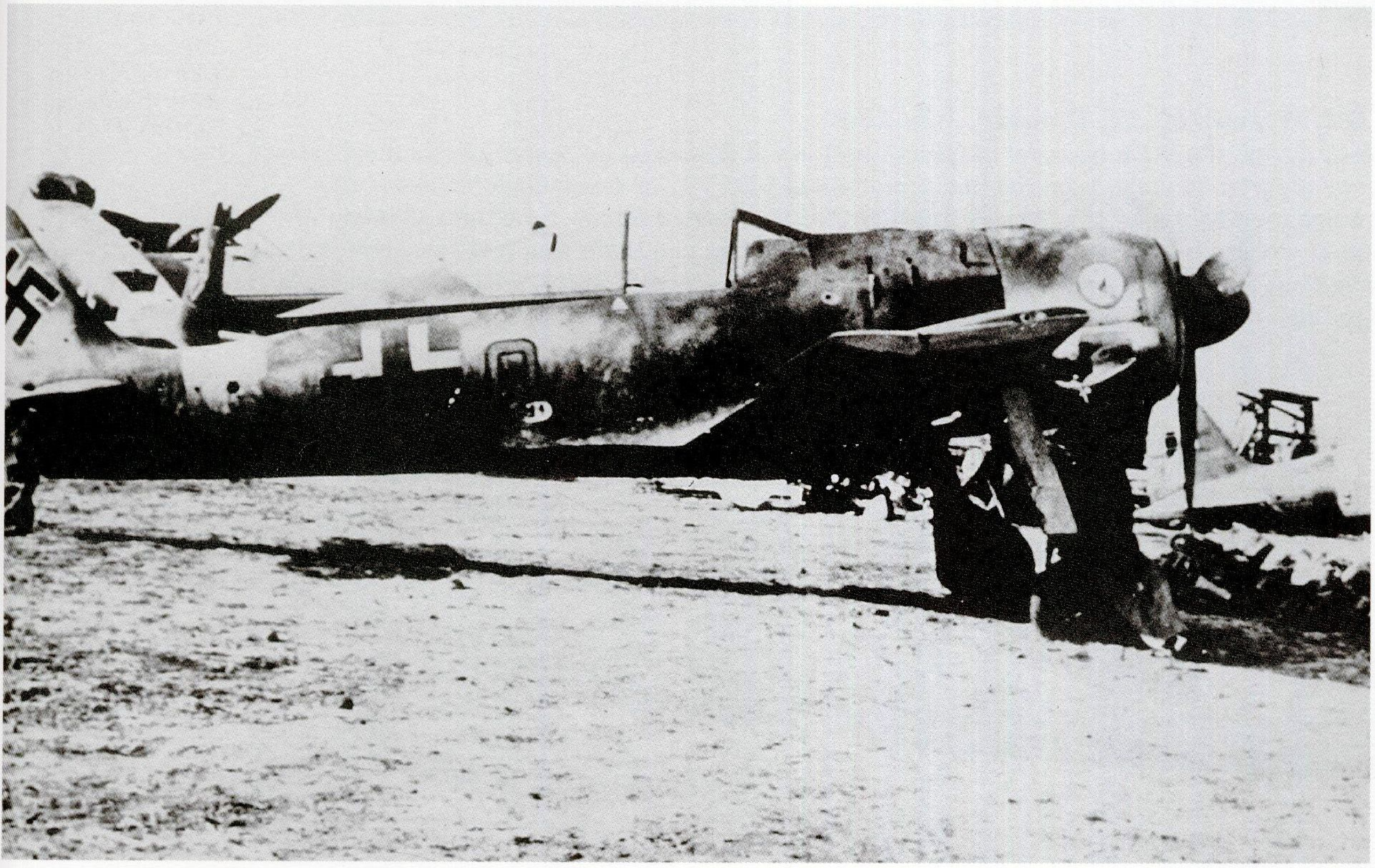
ABOVE: This is the scene confronting British troops when they captured the airfield at San Pietro/Biscari. Although the craters show the airfield had received some attention from Allied bombers, these aircraft had almost all incurred some degree of damage before the bombing and had been collected together on one side of the airfield as a source of spares. The Bf 109 fuselage on the right, for example, has had its engine and wing removed and 'Black 7', a Bf 109 G-6/trop, W.Nr. 18183, formerly of 2./JG 77, was badly damaged in a crash-landing on 2 July 1943. Also visible behind the engineless fuselage on the right is a Bf 109 G-2, W.Nr. 14000, of II./JG 51 with Stab markings and this Gruppe's bar below the cockpit. Behind 'Black 7' is an Fw 190 which had belonged to SKG 10.

BELOW: Another view of the aircraft graveyard at San Pietro/Biscari, Sicily, showing the remains of several Bf 109 and Fw 190 aircraft. On the left, with a white Gruppe bar and black Stab markings outlined in white, is a Bf 109 G-2, W.Nr. 14000, which had flown with Stab II./JG 51. The Fw 190 in the foreground is almost certainly an A-5/U8, W.Nr. 1444, which is believed to have been written off at the end of May 1943 and which still carries part of the factory Stammkennzeichen NM+WL on the fuselage. Note also the Fw 190 with the white or yellow letter 'G' to the right of the picture. This was an Fw 190 A-5/U8, believed to be W.Nr. 840204, and probably flew with Sch.G 2.

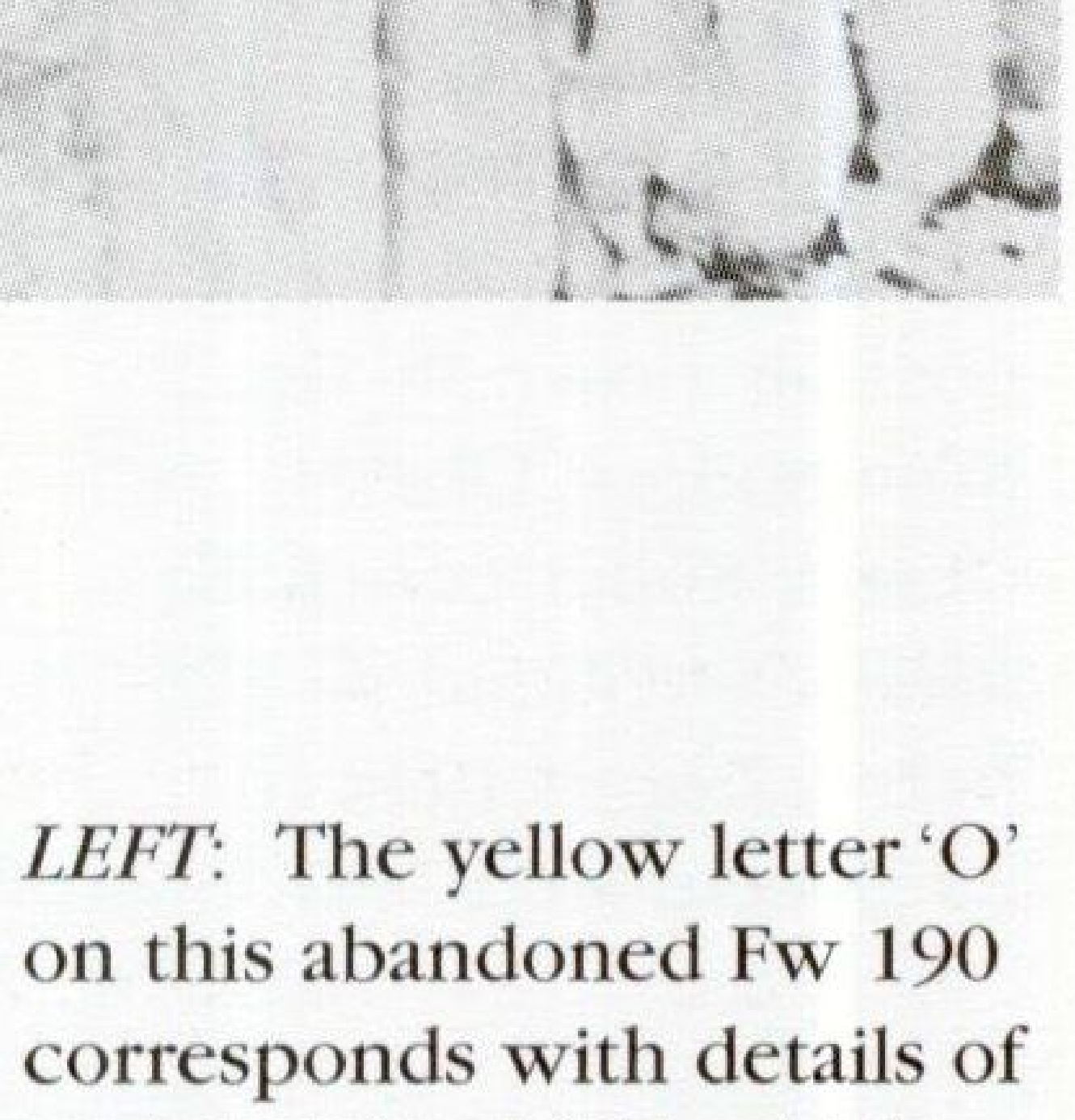




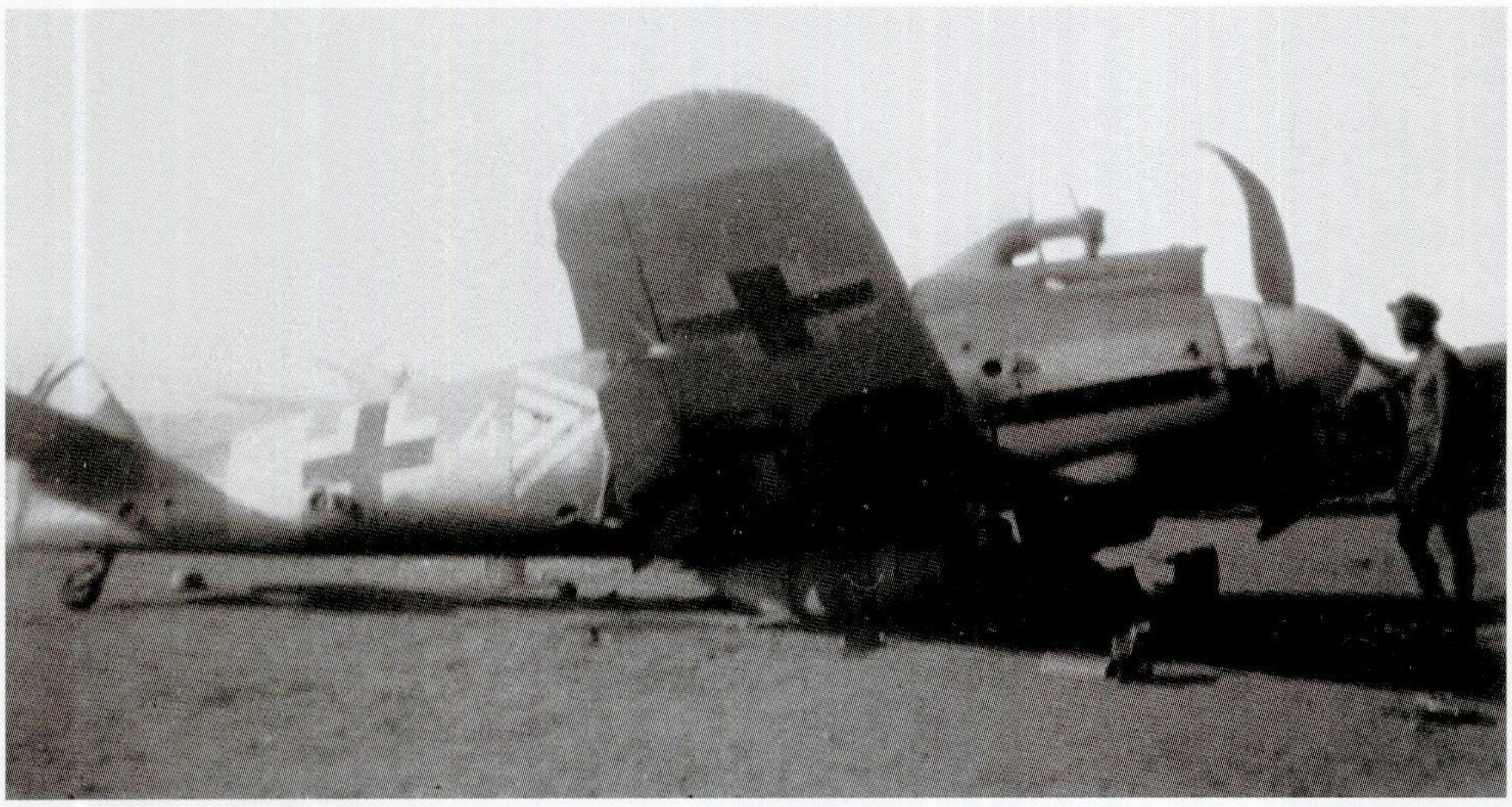
ABOVE: The remains of German aircraft at Trapani. On the left, complete with fairings for long-range tanks, are the wings of an Fw 190 A of SKG 10, while on the right is a Bf 109 G-6 'Yellow 8', W.Nr. 19482 of III./JG 27. On the original print it is possible to see the Werk Nummer chalked under the cockpit.

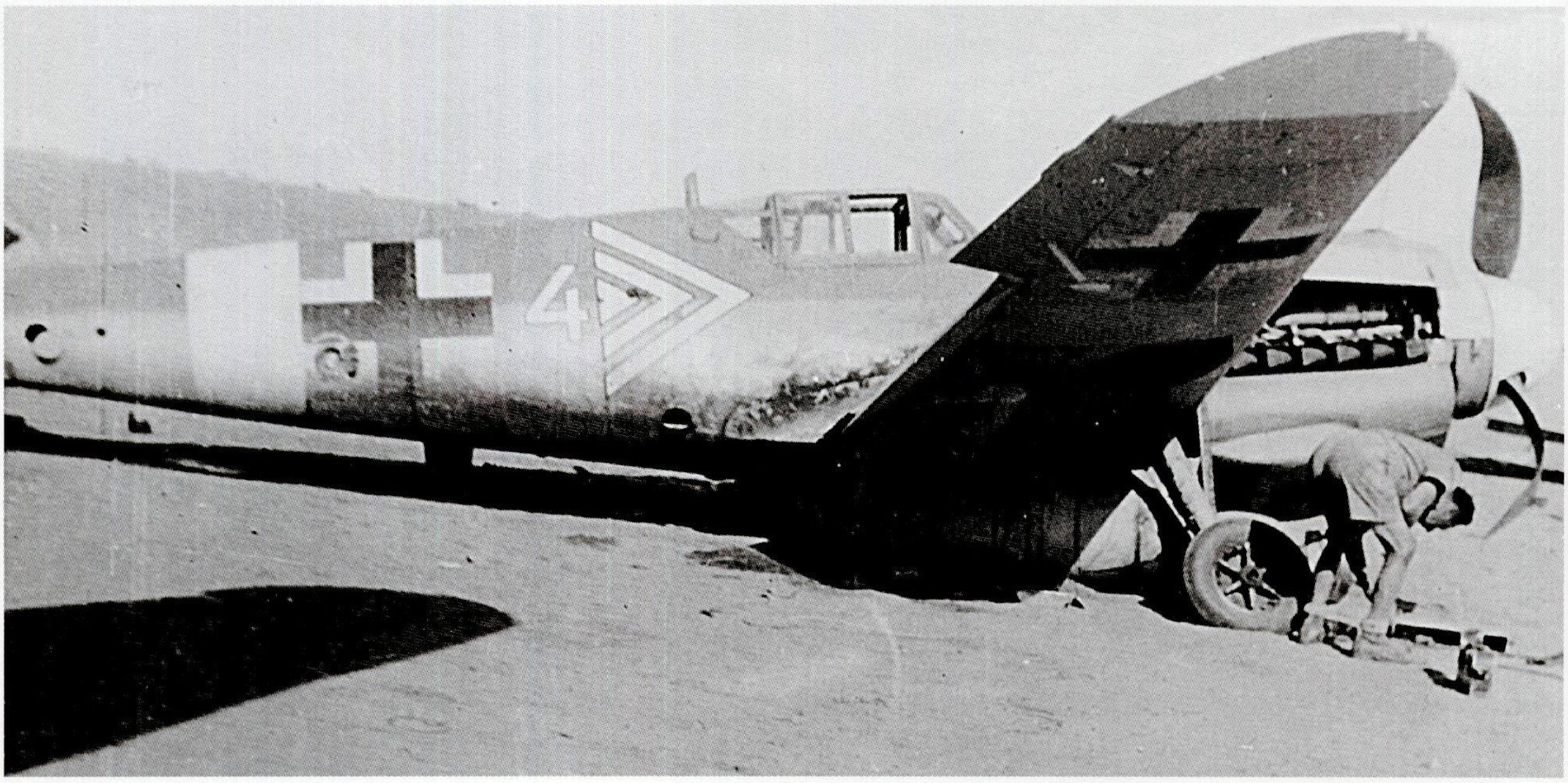


LEFT: The yellow letter 'O' on this abandoned Fw 190 corresponds with details of an A-5, W.Nr. 1437, which was recorded by Allied forces at Catania. Note the 'Mickey Mouse' badge on the nose which, with the yellow identification letter on the fuselage, indicates this aircraft saw service with 7./Sch.G 2. Interestingly, the white disc of the badge appears to be ringed in yellow, a fact confirmed in a number of Allied Intelligence reports.



'Mickey Mouse' Badge of Sch.G 2

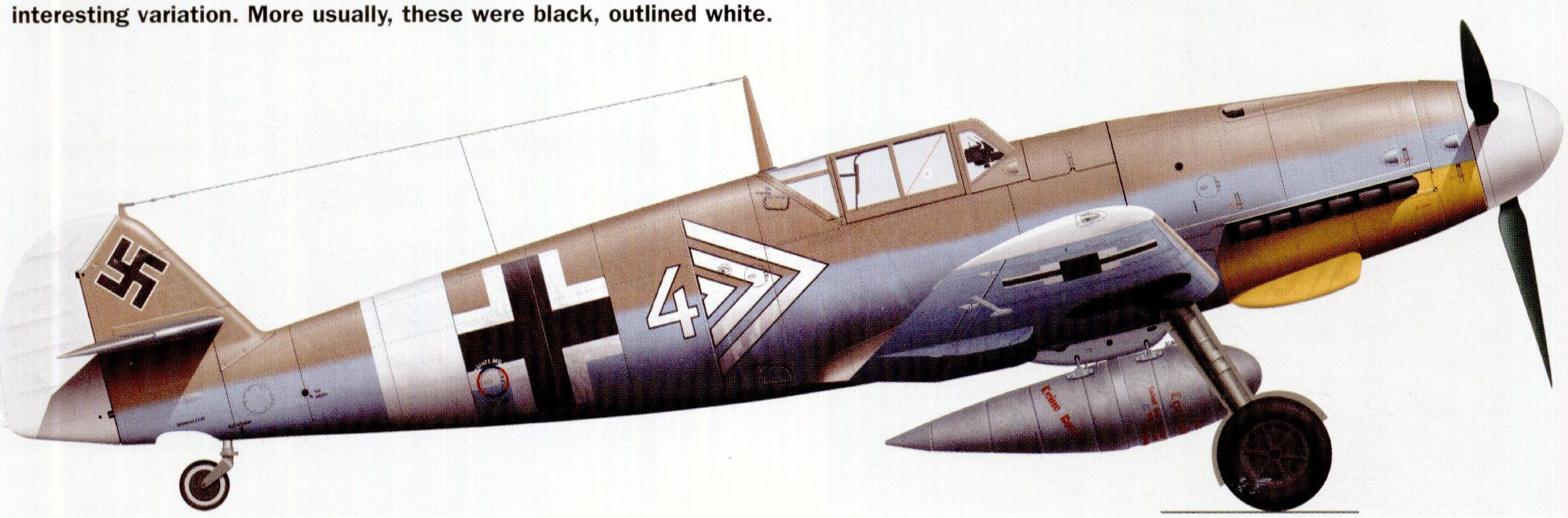


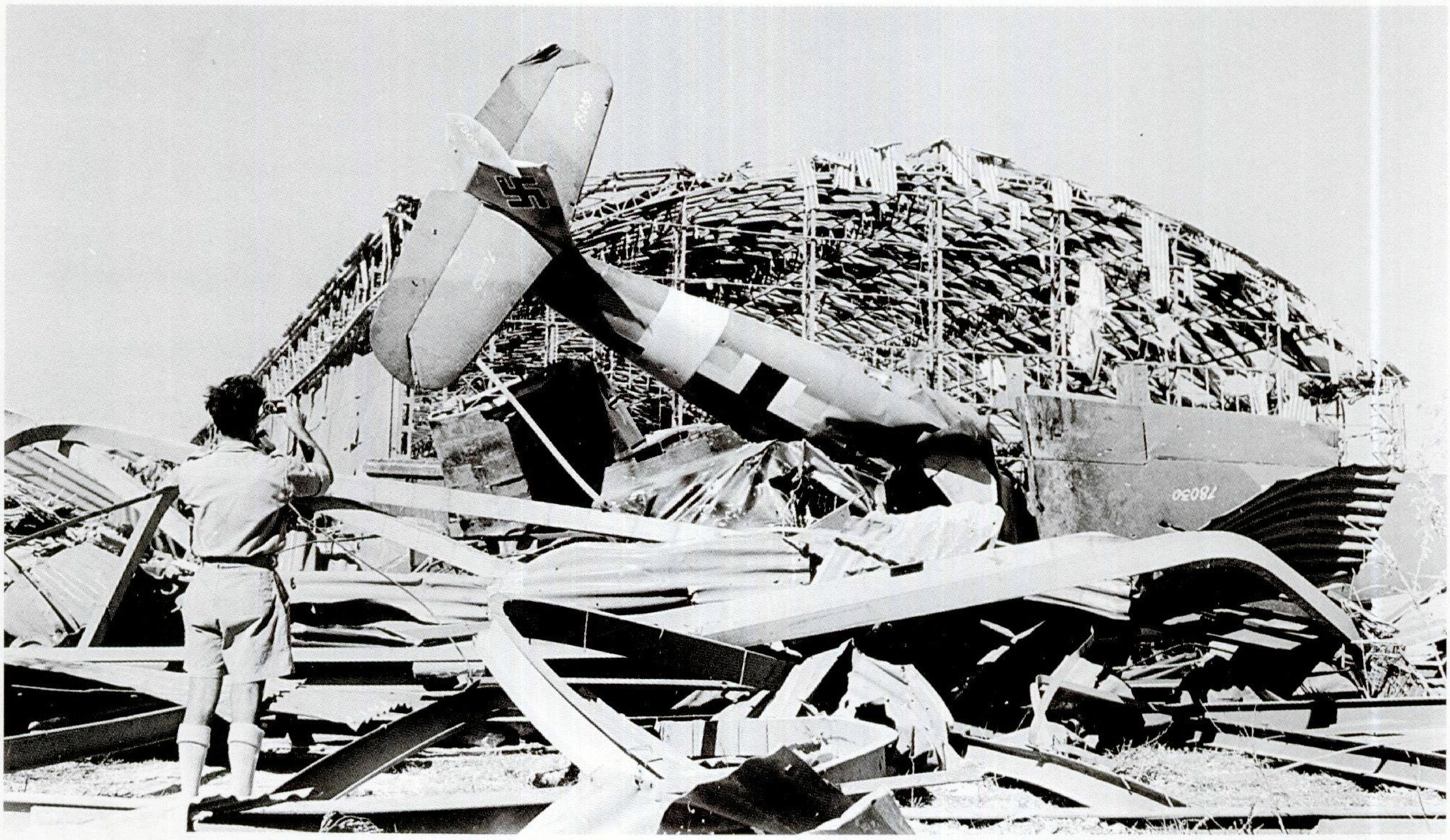


THIS PAGE: This wrecked Bf 109 G-2 is thought to have been abandoned at Catania in July 1943. The triple chevron on the fuselage side is a variation of the markings normally carried by the Geschwaderkommodore, but used here in combination with a number is believed to indicate that this was one of the aircraft assigned to the Geschwader Stab flight and as such was quite possibly flown by the Kommodore, Oberst Gustav Rödel, (*ABOVE RIGHT*) who led JG 27 from 22 April 1943 to 29 December 1944.

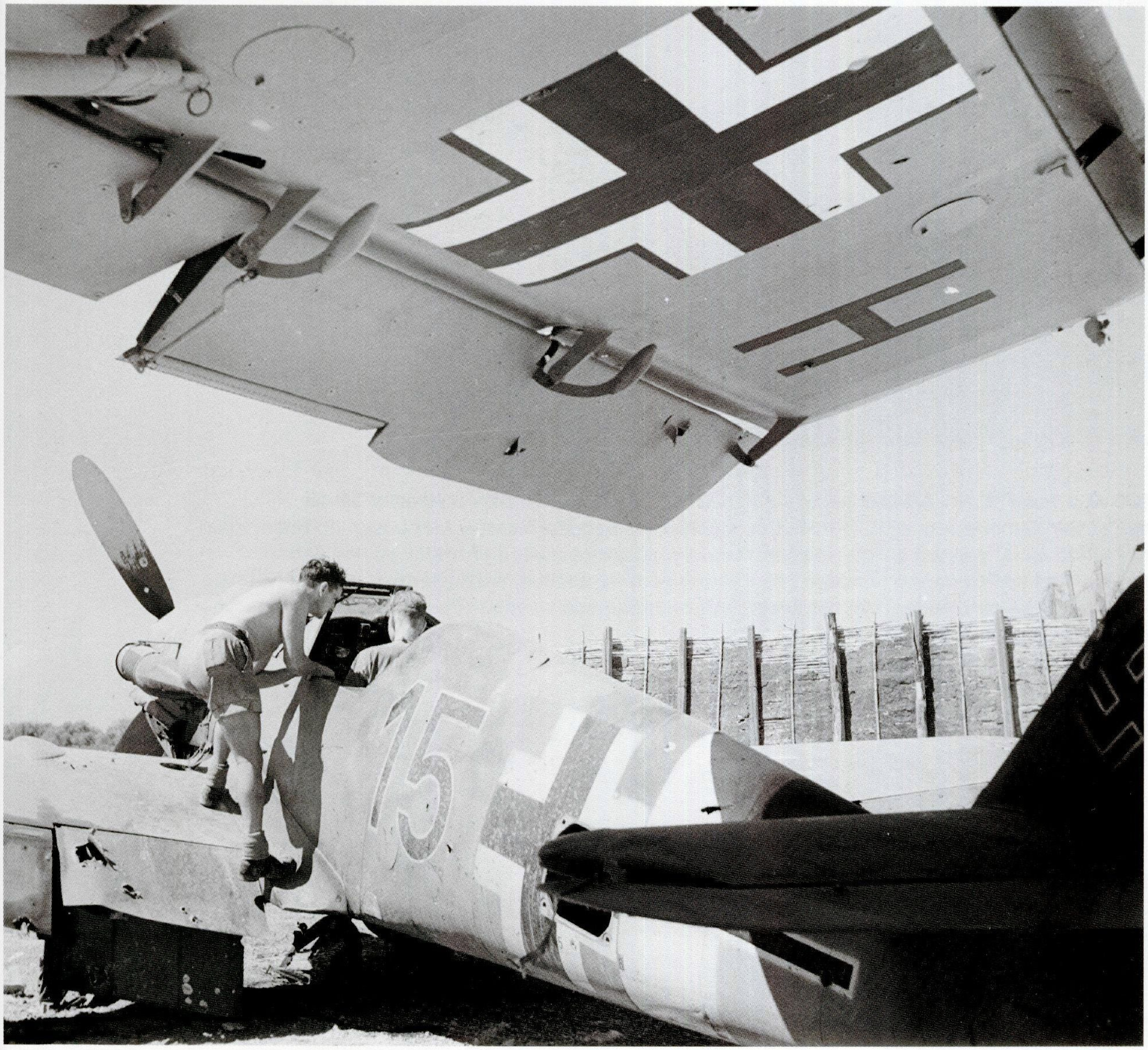
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2 of Stab/JG 27, Catania, July 1943

Although photographed several times, the Werk Nummer of this aircraft is not known as no record of this machine can be traced in Allied Intelligence reports. To judge from the mid-demarcation RLM 78/79 camouflage scheme, this aircraft had been delivered some months earlier in a factory finish obviously intended to suit conditions in North Africa. Theatre markings in the form of a white fuselage band and wingtips were applied and there was a yellow identification panel under the nose. Although not unique, the presentation of the fuselage markings in white, outlined black, is an interesting variation. More usually, these were black, outlined white.

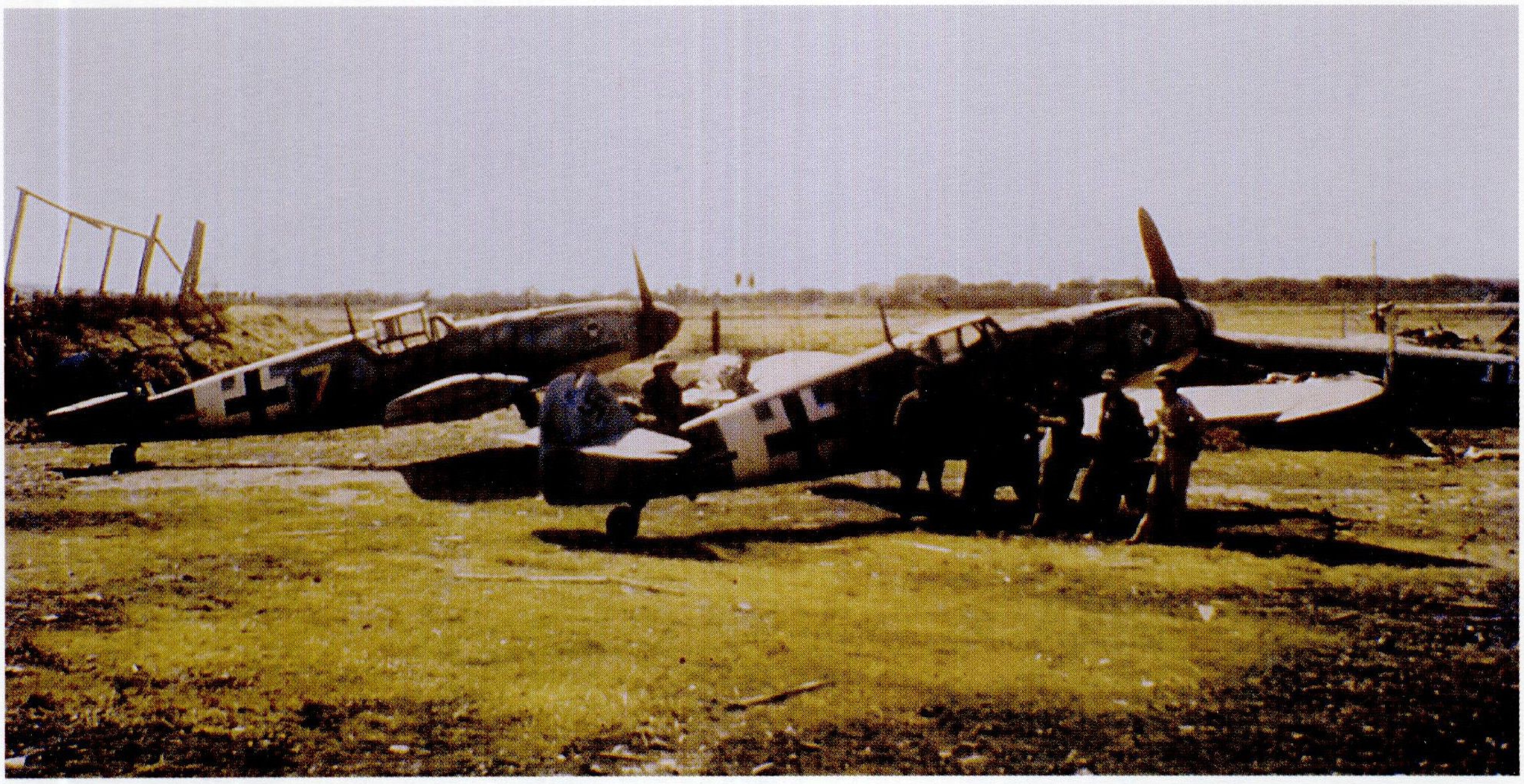




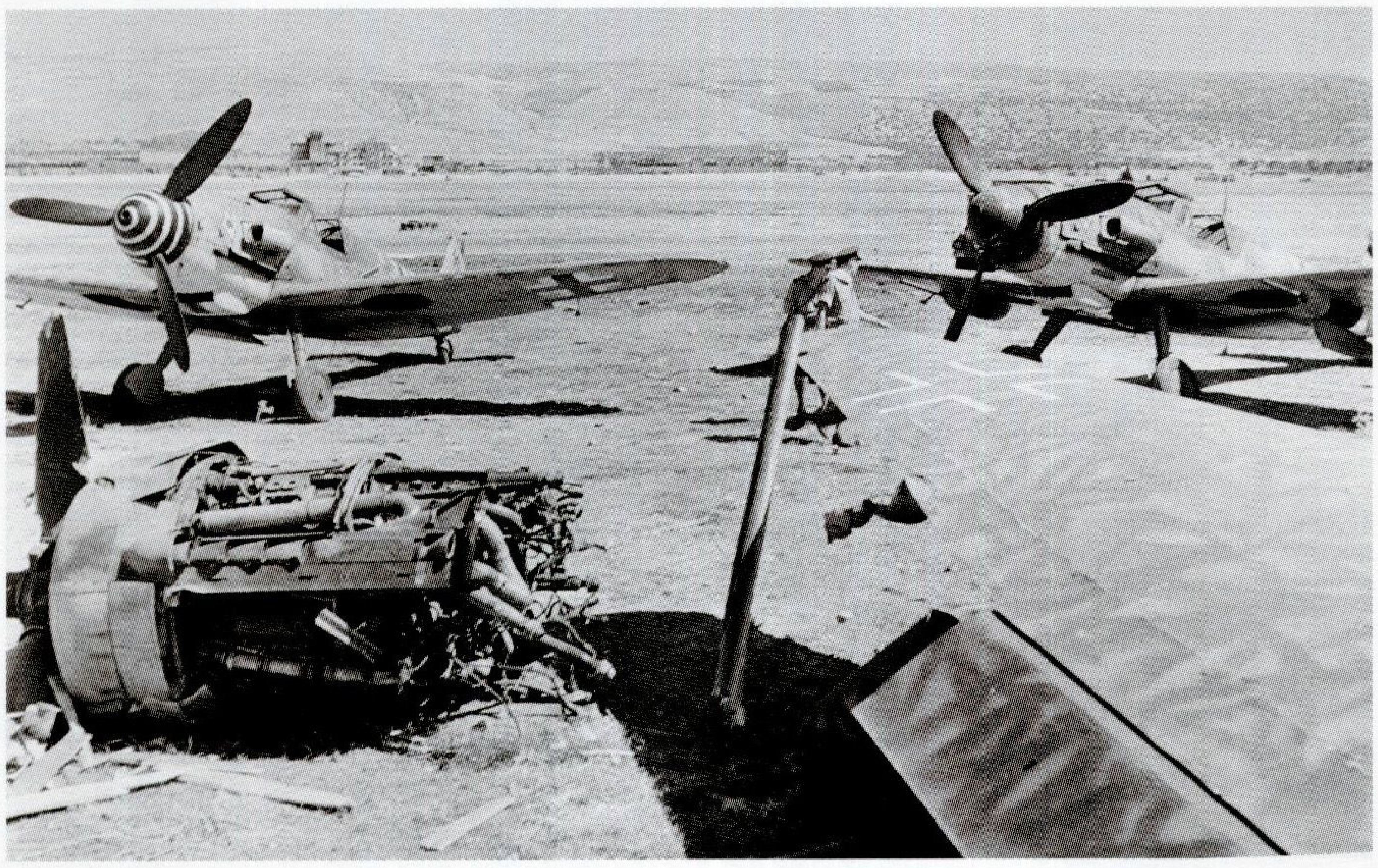
RIGHT: Allied troops examining a Bf 109 G-6 discovered on Comiso airfield. Although not visible here, this aircraft, W.Nr 18030, was 'Black 6' and had flown with 5./JG 53 before Allied bombing reduced it to scrap. The application of the Werk Nummer to the wings and tailplanes possibly indicates that at some time before seeing operational service it had been transported by rail in a disassembled condition. The fuselage code and the horizontal Gruppe bar on this machine were both edged in white.



LEFT: This Bf 109 G-6 trop 'Black 15', was also found abandoned at Comiso and is believed to be the aircraft which an RAF report states was W.Nr. 16242. If correct, then the black numeral and Gruppe bar indicate that this machine had previously belonged to 5/JG 53.



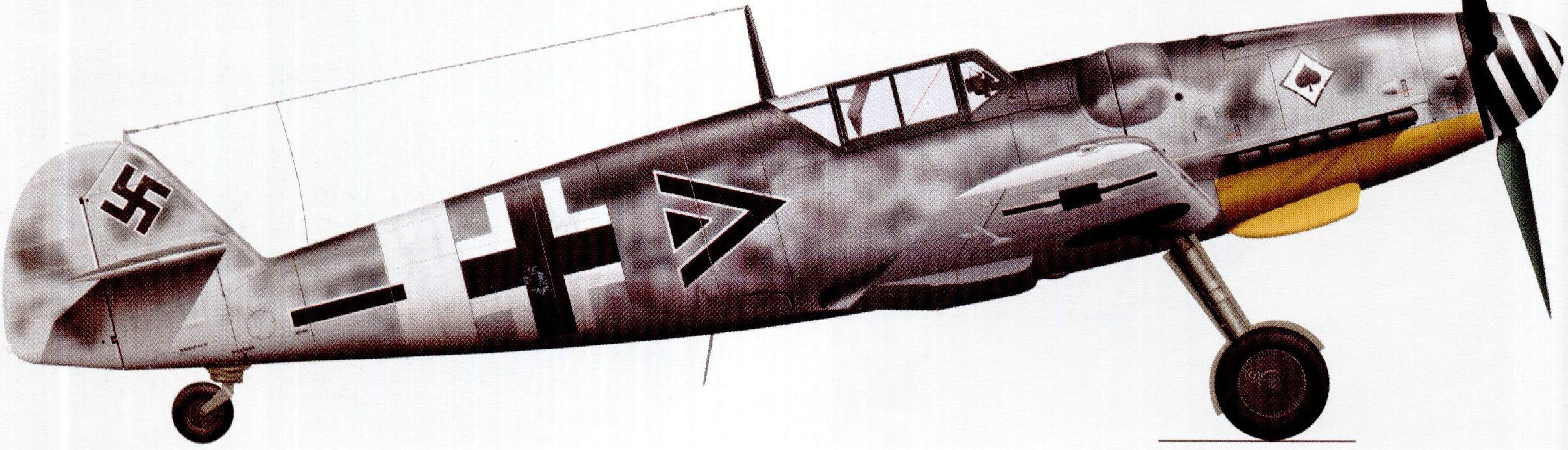
LEFT: US troops inspecting just two of the 80 Bf 109s, mainly G-6s and a lesser number of G-4s, found abandoned on the Sicilian airfield at Comiso after it was occupied by Allied forces in mid-July 1943. The machine on the left, a Bf 109 G-6, 'Yellow 7', W.Nr. 18068, belonged to 6./JG 53 and was only lightly damaged, while the aircraft on the right, also lightly damaged but with equipment missing or looted, was a G-6 trop, W.Nr. 18410, marked with the Stab and Gruppe symbols of Major Gerhard Michalski, Kommandeur of II./JG 53.

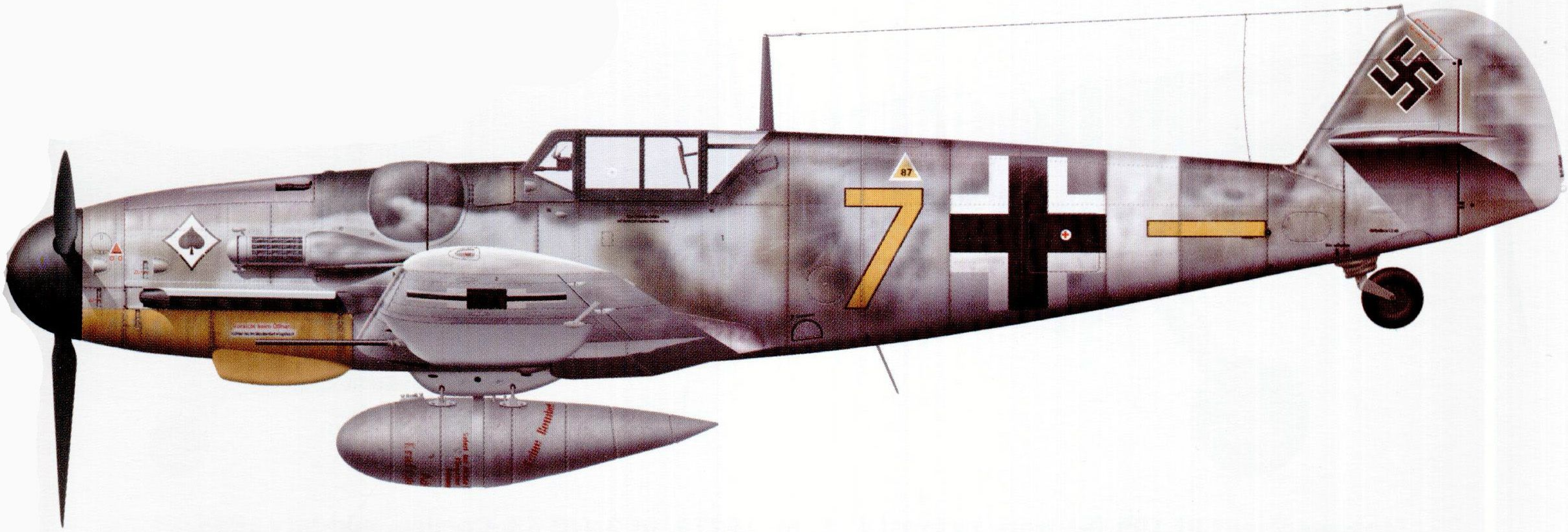


LEFT: This photograph shows the same two aircraft being examined by RAF personnel and reveals more clearly that Major Michalski's aircraft, on the right, had a spiral spinner and, unlike 'Yellow 7', was not fitted with underwing MG 151 cannon. In the foreground of this photograph is the sand coloured wing of a Ju 88 which has received further camouflage in the form of a green overspray.

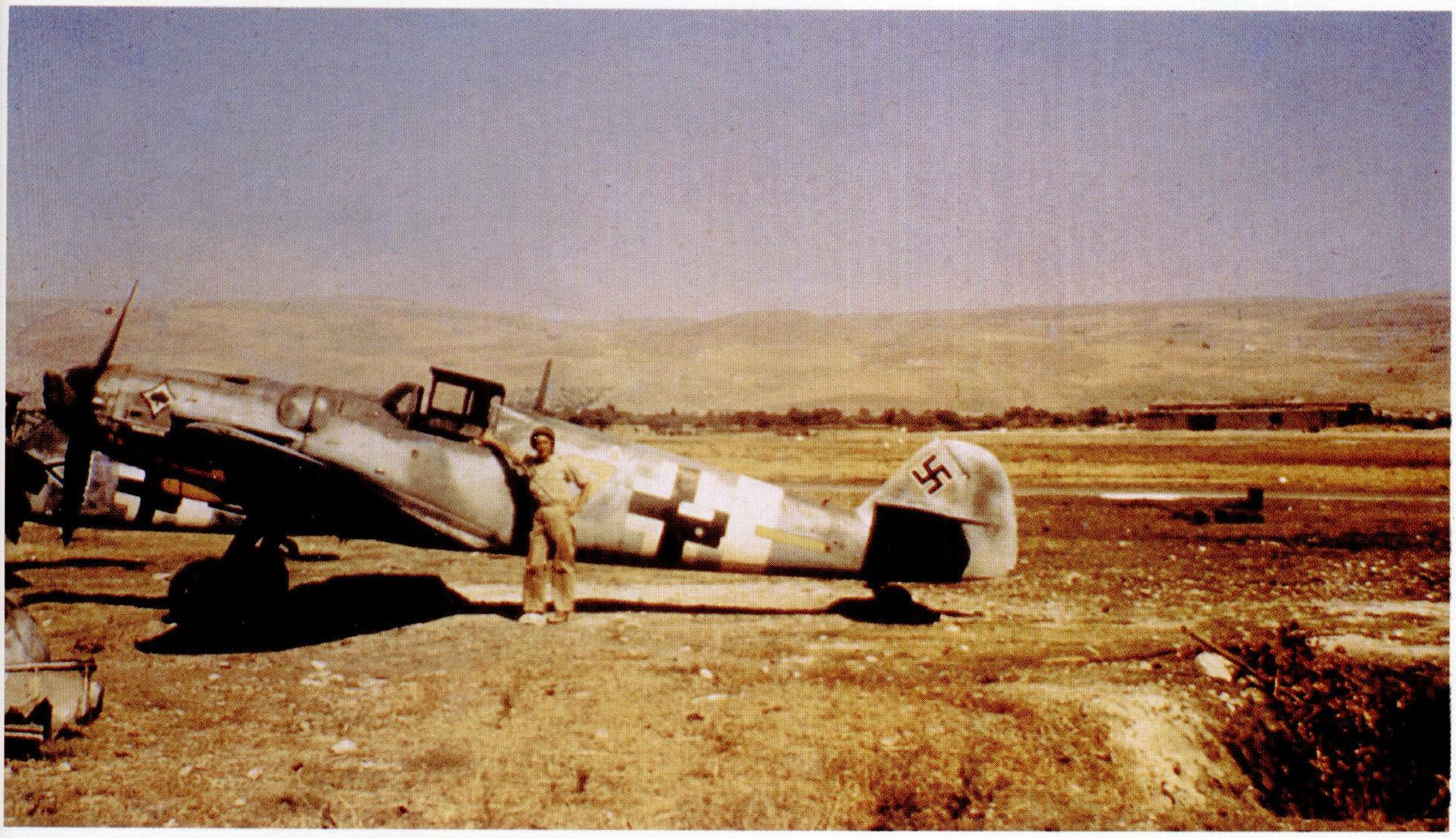
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 trop W.Nr. 18410 of Stab II./JG 53, Comiso, Sicily, mid-July 1943

Wearing the full markings of the Kommandeur of II./JG 53, this machine carried the Geschwader badge on the engine cowling and had a narrow white spiral painted on the spinner. The camouflage consisted of the usual day fighter RLM 74/75/76 colours with the mottles on the fuselage being rather densely applied, particularly in the mid-fuselage area. This aircraft was fitted with an air cleaner over the supercharger intake and wooden clips for a sunshade on the port fuselage side. The gunsight is a Revi C/12D.

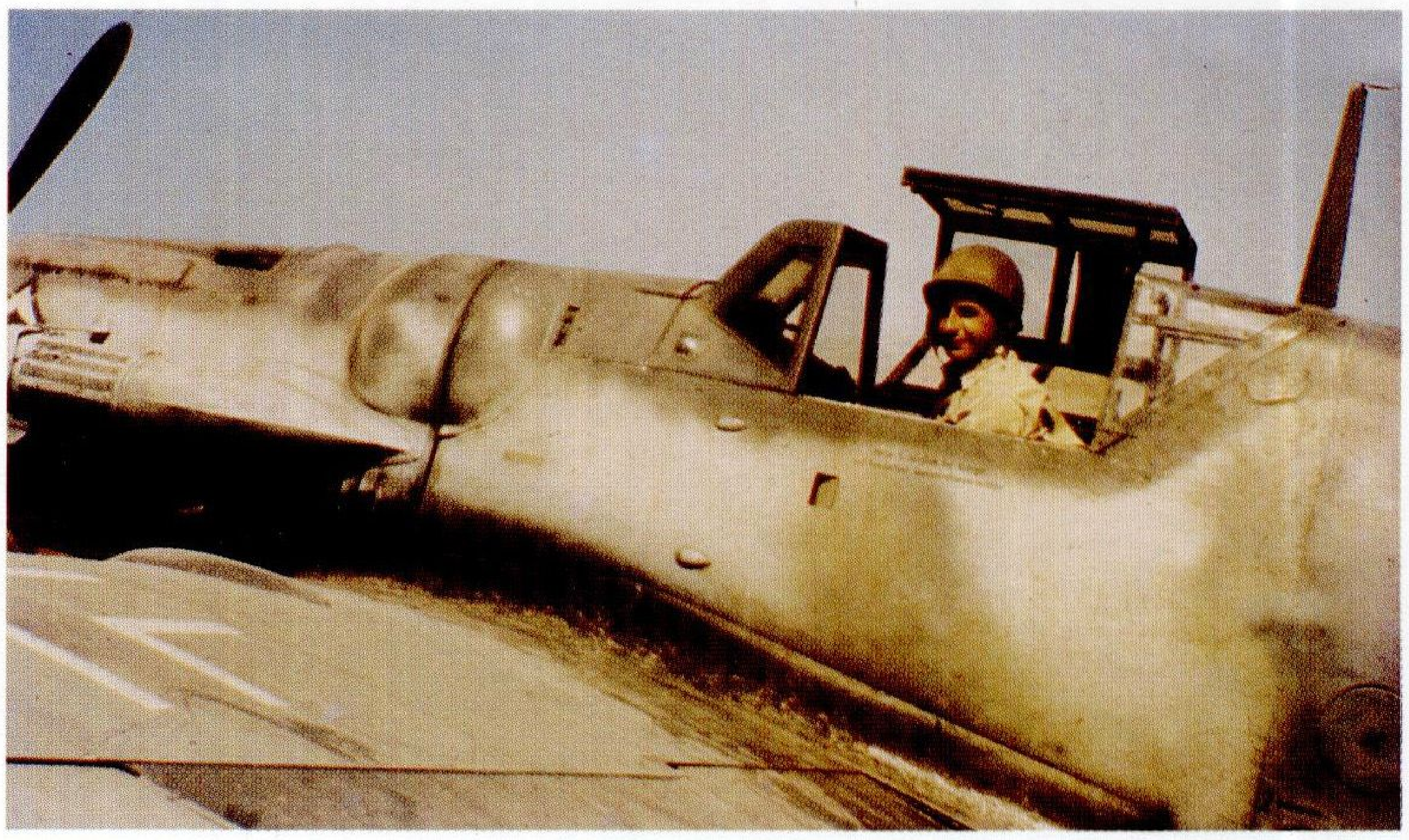


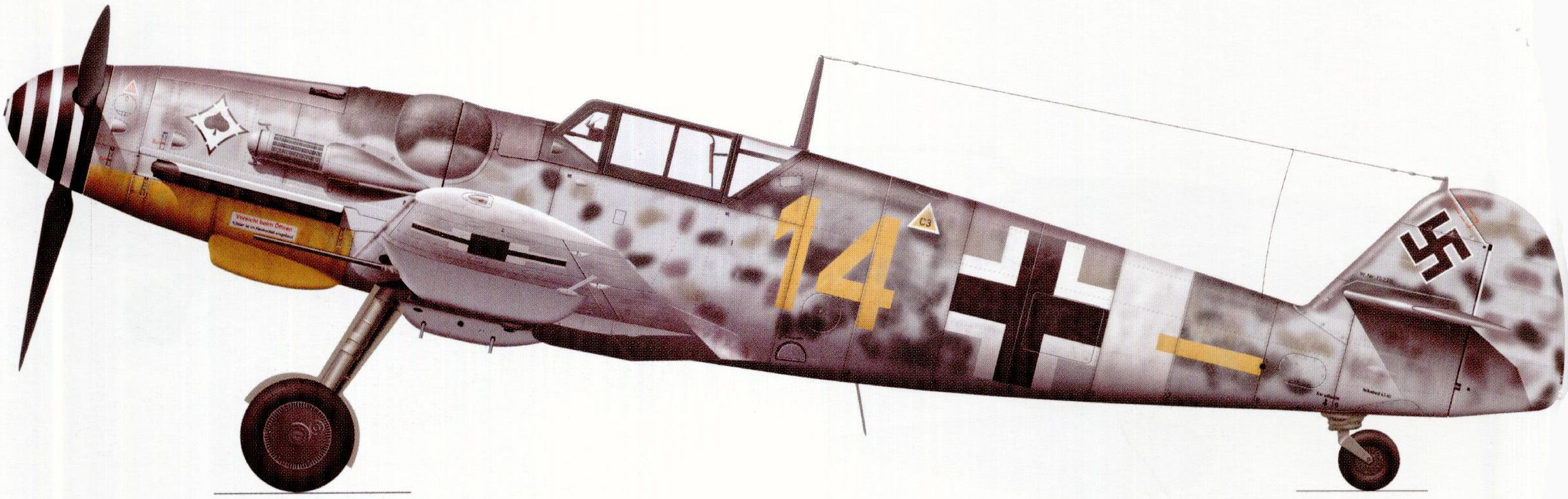


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Yellow 7', W.Nr. 18068, of 6./JG 53, Comiso, mid-July 1943
Although camouflaged in standard RLM 74/75/76 colours, the finish on the fuselage of this machine is in stripes, or bands of RLM 74 and 75 rather than the more usual mottles. Also unusual for the period is the use of a single green, RLM 70, on the spinner. Standard white theatre markings have been applied and a yellow recognition panel appears under the nose. Note that the gunsight shown in this profile is a Revi 16B, a model which was fitted during Bf 109 G-6 production although both this and the earlier Revi 16B were in service at the same time.

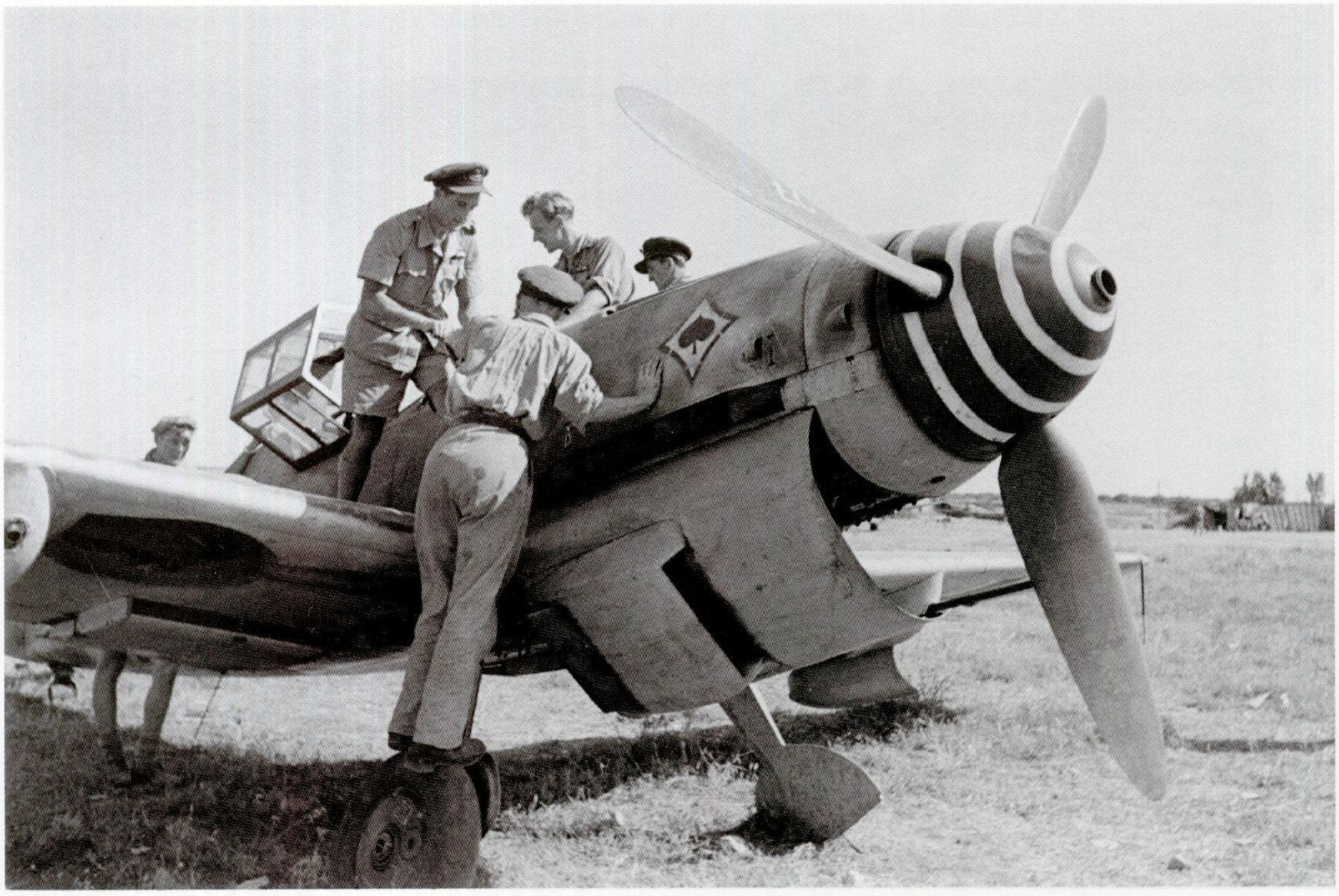


ABOVE AND RIGHT: Although the RAF A.I.2(g) report on 'Yellow 7' does not state that it was a tropical version, as these two photographs show, it was fitted with an air cleaner ahead of the supercharger intake and brackets for a parasol under the cockpit. Also of interest is the camouflage pattern on the fuselage which has been sprayed more in the way of diagonal stripes rather than the traditional mottles. Otherwise, both this and W.Nr. 18410, shown opposite had similar white theatre bands around the rear fuselage and a standard yellow panel under the nose which allowed Axis ground troops to identify the aircraft as friendly. Note that in the view of 'Yellow 7' above, the radio access panel has been fitted upside down.

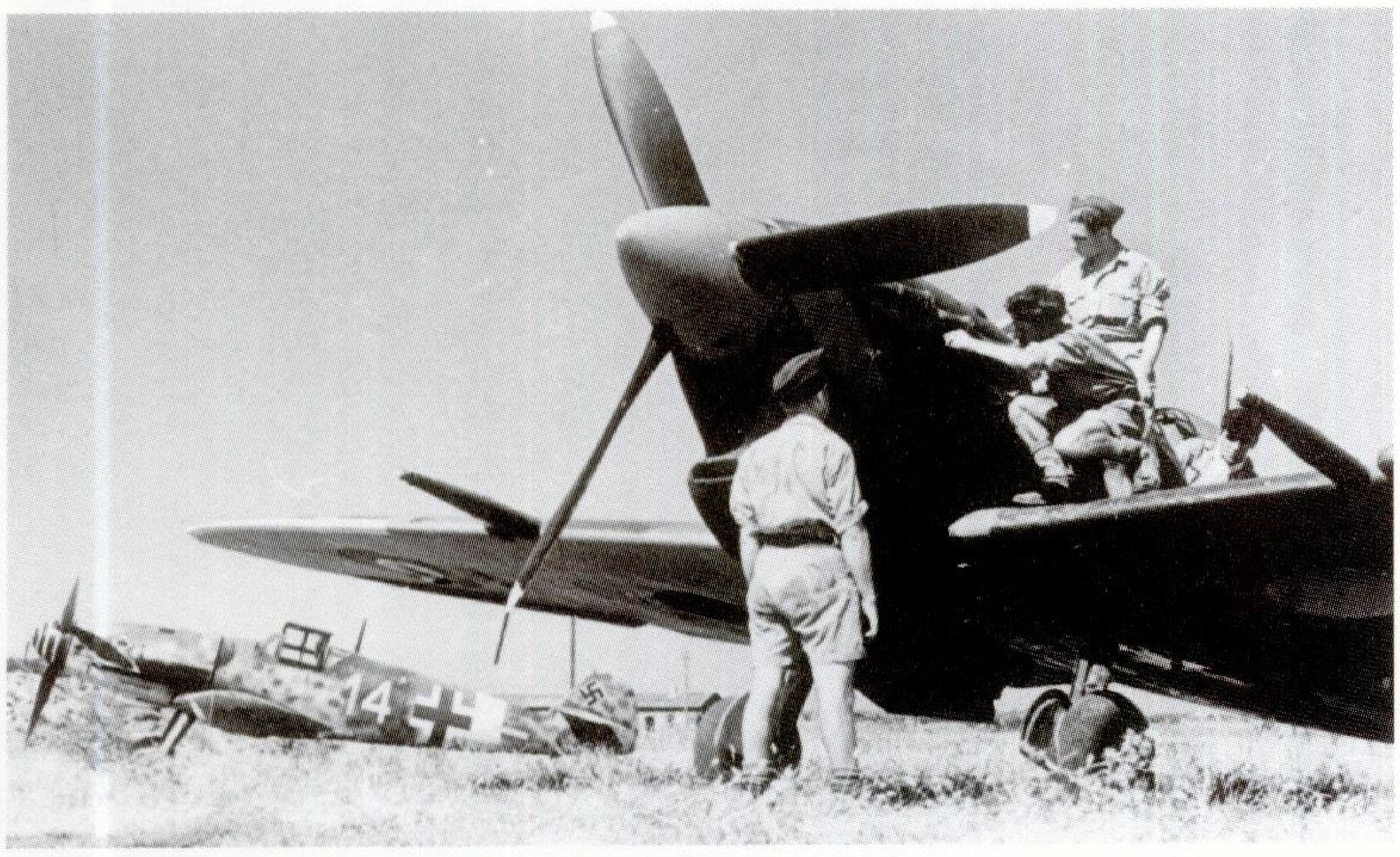


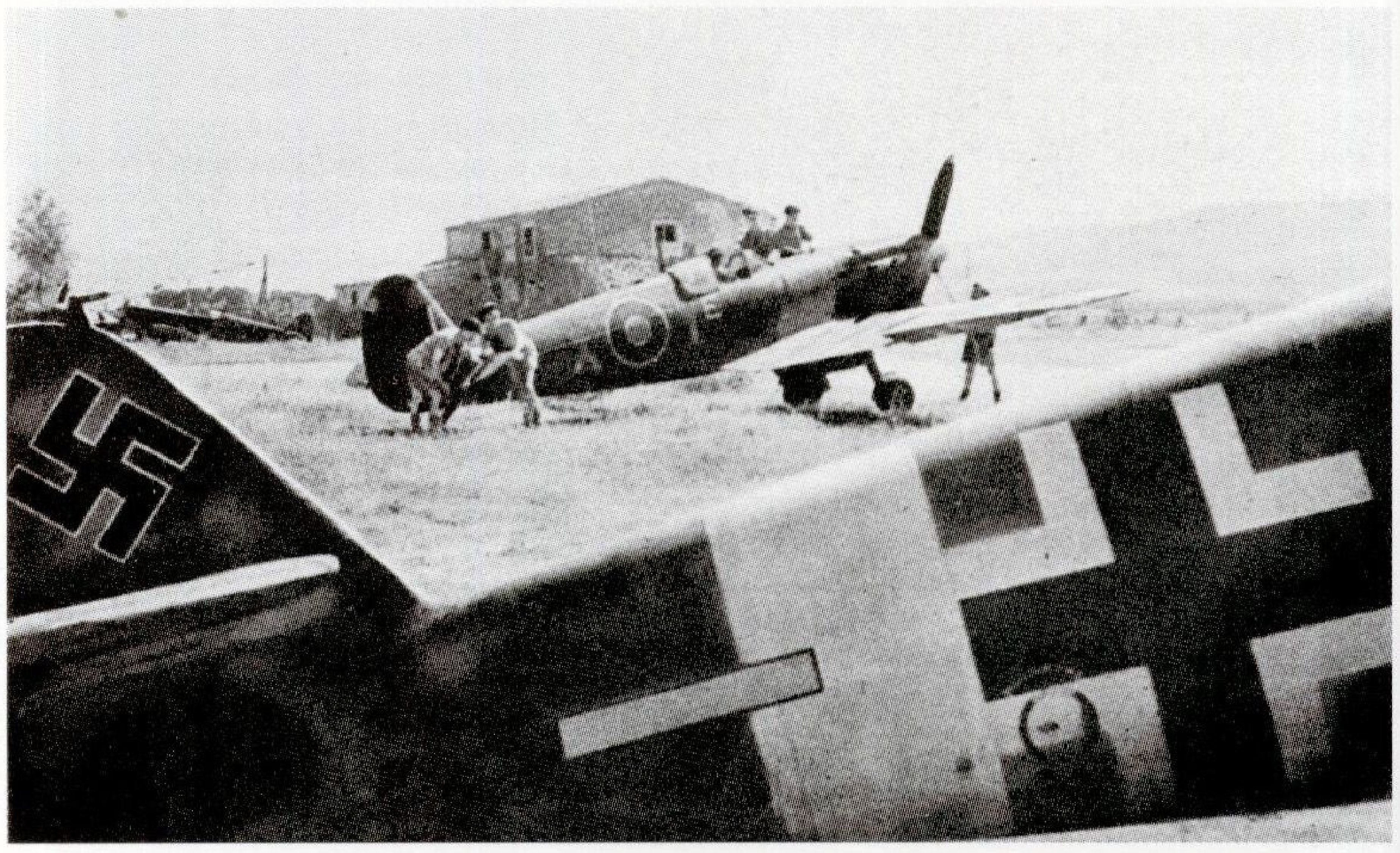


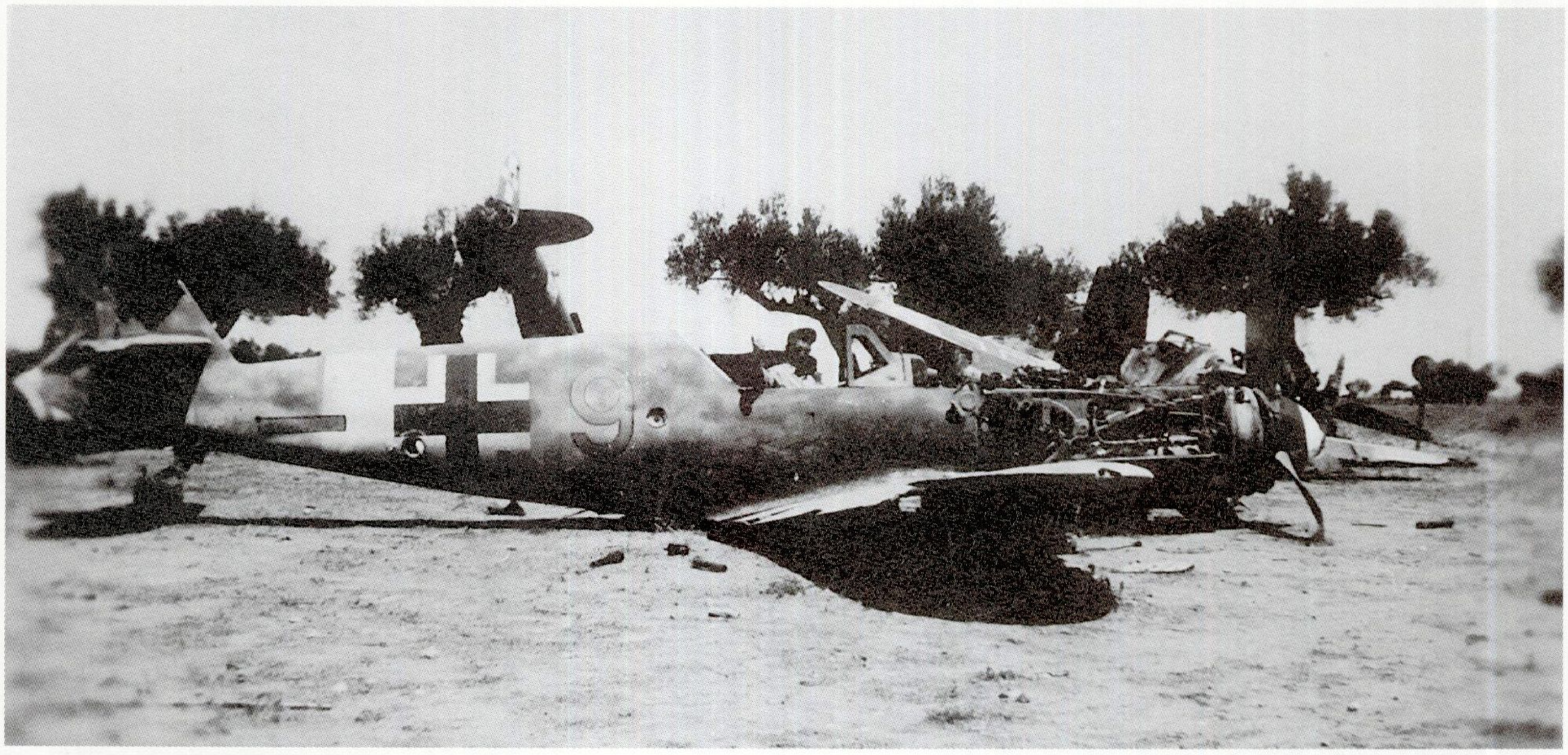
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 trop 'Yellow 14', W.Nr. 15270, of 6./JG 53, Comiso, mid-July 1943
This aircraft was finished in a very good example of the basic day fighter scheme first introduced in 1941 and still current in 1943. The undersurfaces were RLM 76 while the uppersurfaces of the wings, tailplane and the top of the fuselage were finished in a splinter pattern of RLM 74 and 75, while the fuselage sides were mottled in 74 and 75 with the addition of further mottles in RLM 02. Note the hand-painted black and white spinner.

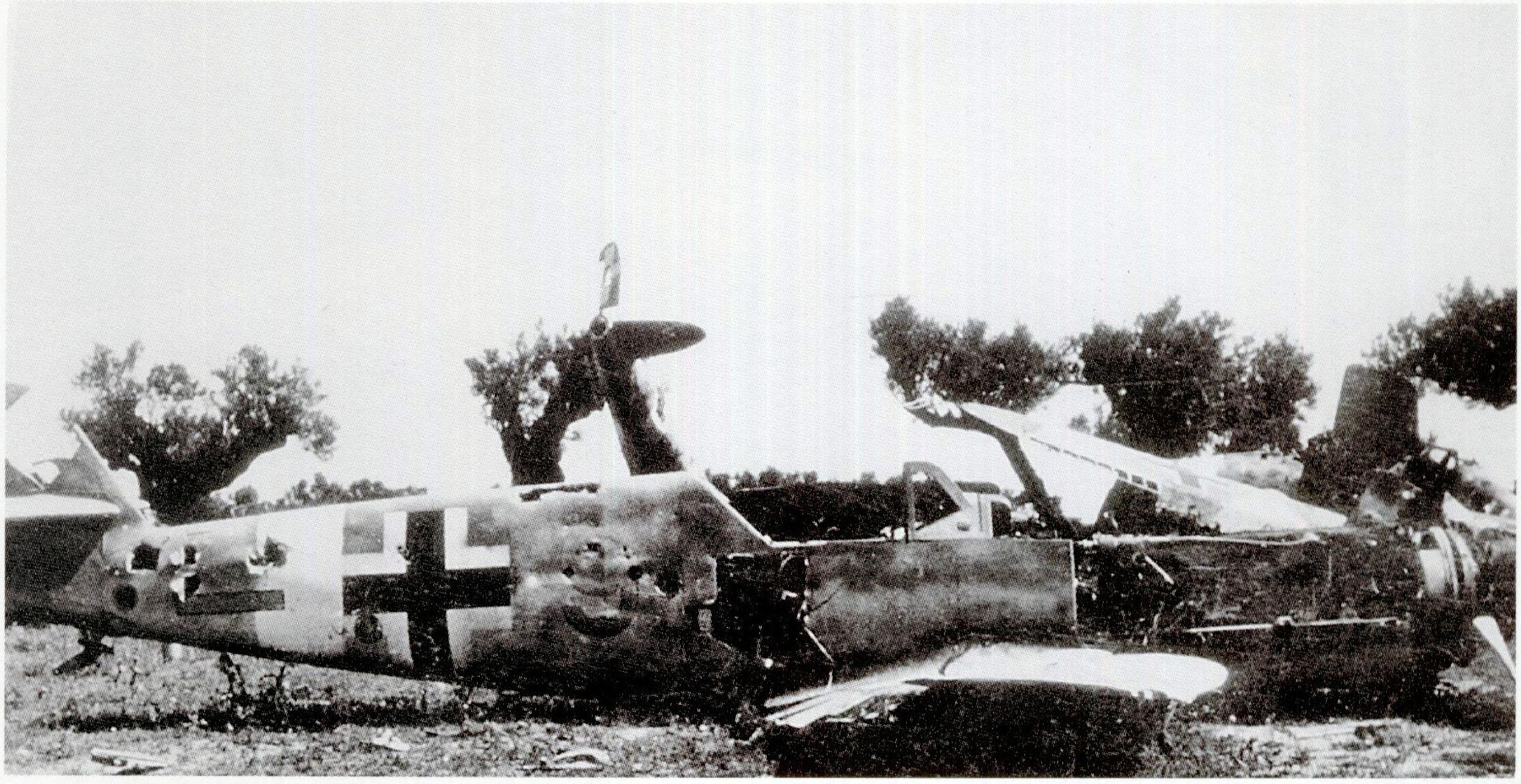


THIS PAGE: RAF personnel taking a keen interest in an abandoned Bf 109 G trop, 'Yellow 14', W.Nr. 15270, of 6./JG 53 which was captured intact at Comiso. Minor damage had prevented the Staffel from flying the aircraft away when the airfield was evacuated. The white spiral on the spinner was a feature that seems to have originated with JG 53 in the Mediterranean in about mid-1943 and became increasingly popular as an unofficial decorative embellishment. The use of the device later became official, at first perhaps as a safety feature and later progressively more widespread as a recognition aid. Luftflotte Reich and Luftflotte 3 were ordered to apply the spiral to all fighters in February 1944 and, in July, to all fighters, twin-engined fighters, ground-attack and reconnaissance aircraft operating in Germany, France and Italy. The RAF pilots in these photographs belonged to 43 Squadron which arrived at Comiso on 14 July 1943 and was soon joined by four other Spitfire squadrons which also used the airfield in July. In the photographs (BELOW) RAF ground personnel may be seen servicing the Squadron's aircraft.

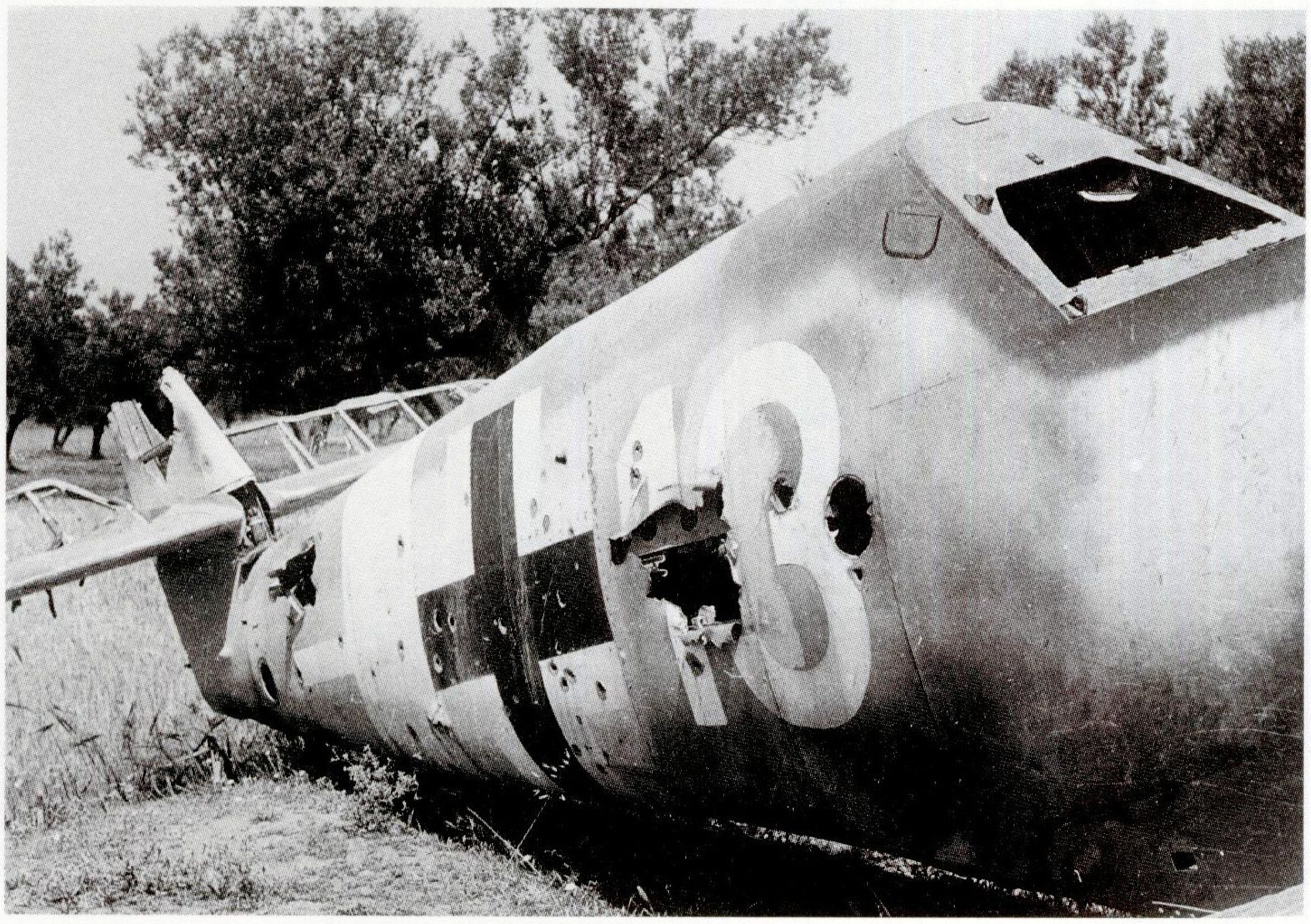




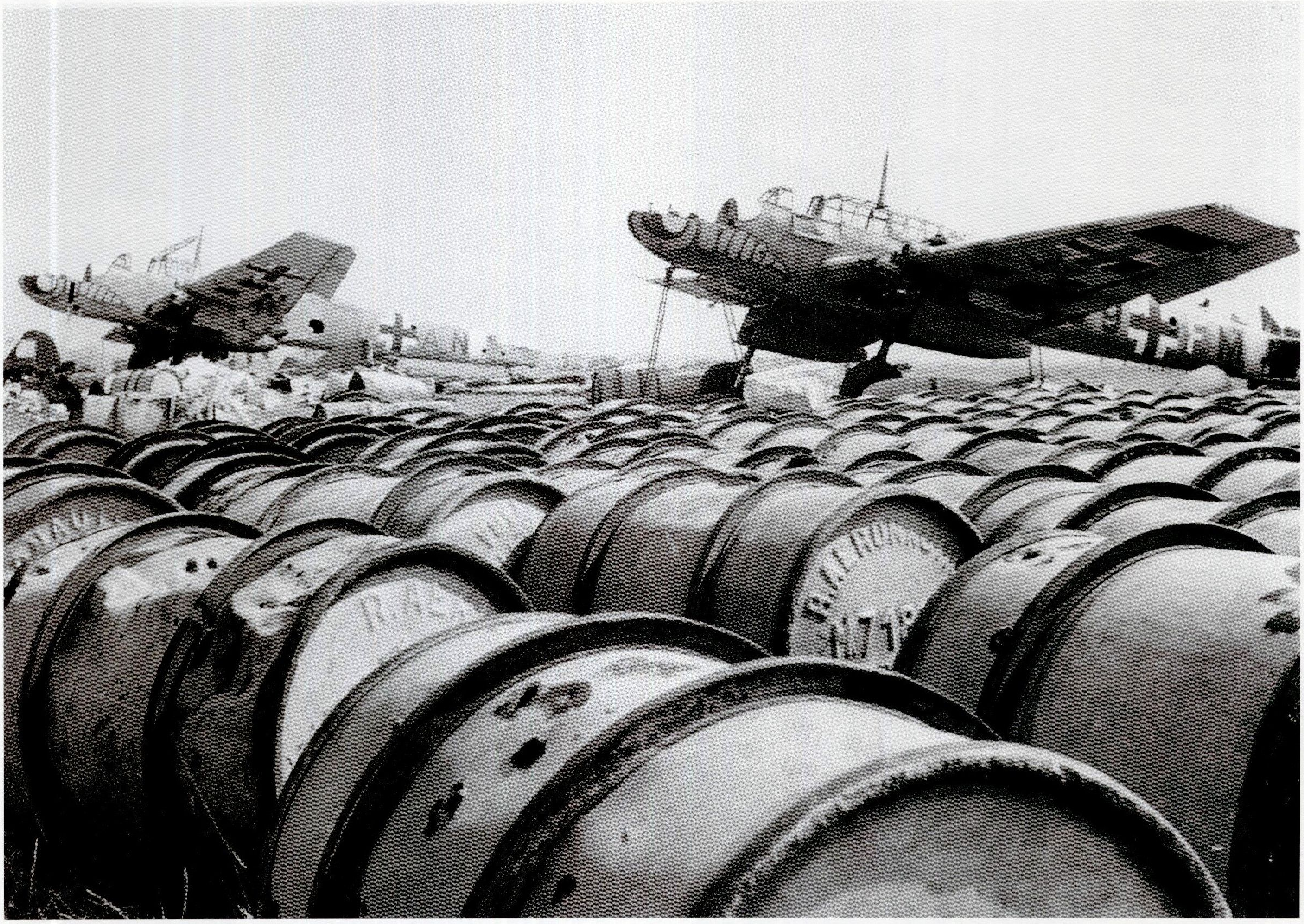




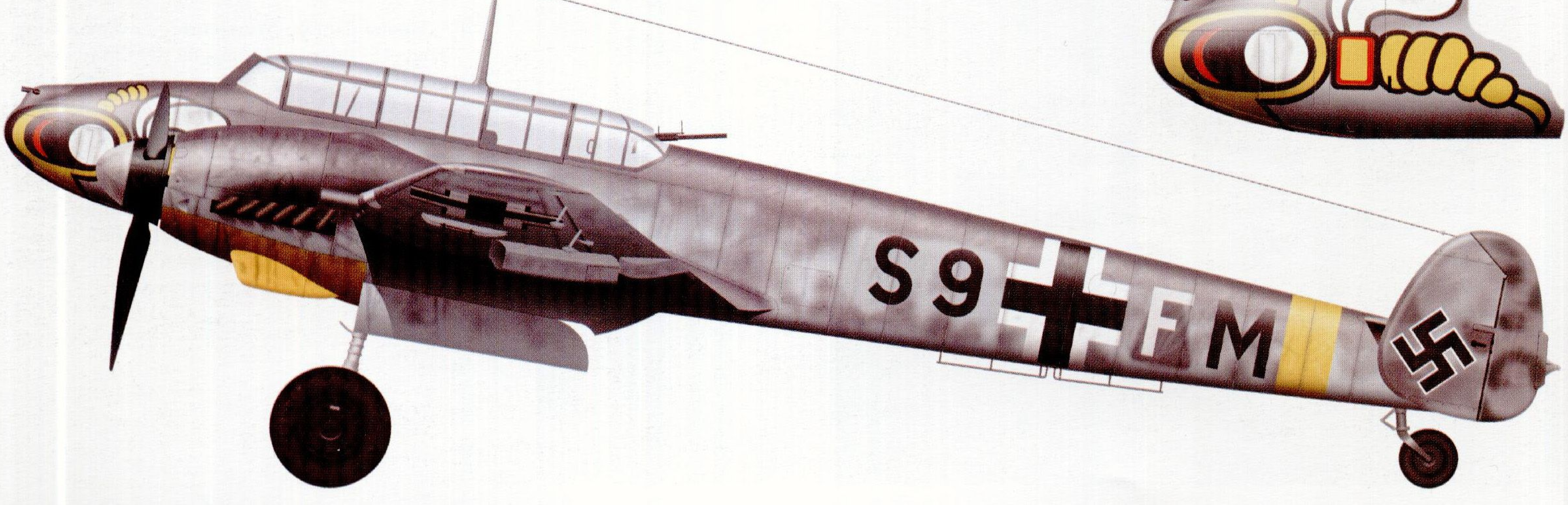
RIGHT AND CENTRE: Scenes on the airfield at Comiso airfield on Sicily where many aircraft were destroyed or damaged on the ground in combined bombing raids by the RAF and USAAF. When the first of these two pictures (*RIGHT*) was taken, the swastika on the tail of this aircraft had already been liberated by souvenir hunters but the fuselage was still relatively intact. By the time the second photograph (*CENTRE*) was taken, it would appear from the holes opened in the aircraft's aluminium skin that several attempts have been made to gain access to the aircraft's internal equipment. The individual aircraft identification 'Yellow 9' and the horizontal bar aft of the fuselage Balkenkreuz identify this Bf 109 G as a 6. Staffel aircraft, almost certainly W.Nr. 16249 of JG 53. Additional damage would suggest that the fuselage had been used for target practice.

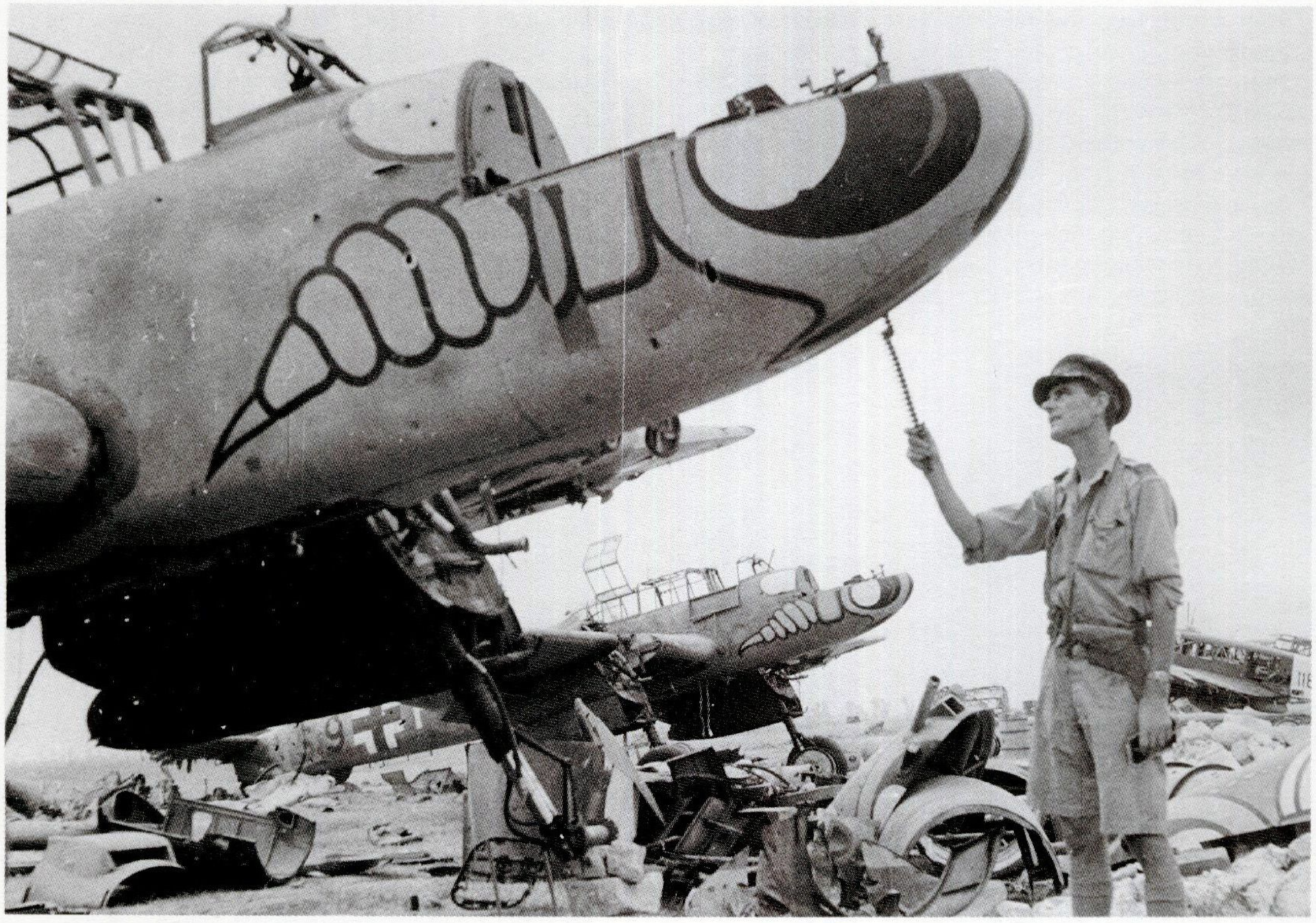


LEFT: Similar damage has occurred to the fuselage of 'White 13', believed to be a Bf 109 G-6 trop, W.Nr. 18011, which served with 1./JG 77. Note the holes around the Balkenkreuz, evidently a target for small arms fire. Damage such as this, and looting, impeded the work of Allied Intelligence teams which were always seeking any new developments in aircraft and equipment. An appeal to officers to control such activity had little effect, mainly, it was subsequently discovered, because it was the officers themselves who were largely responsible.

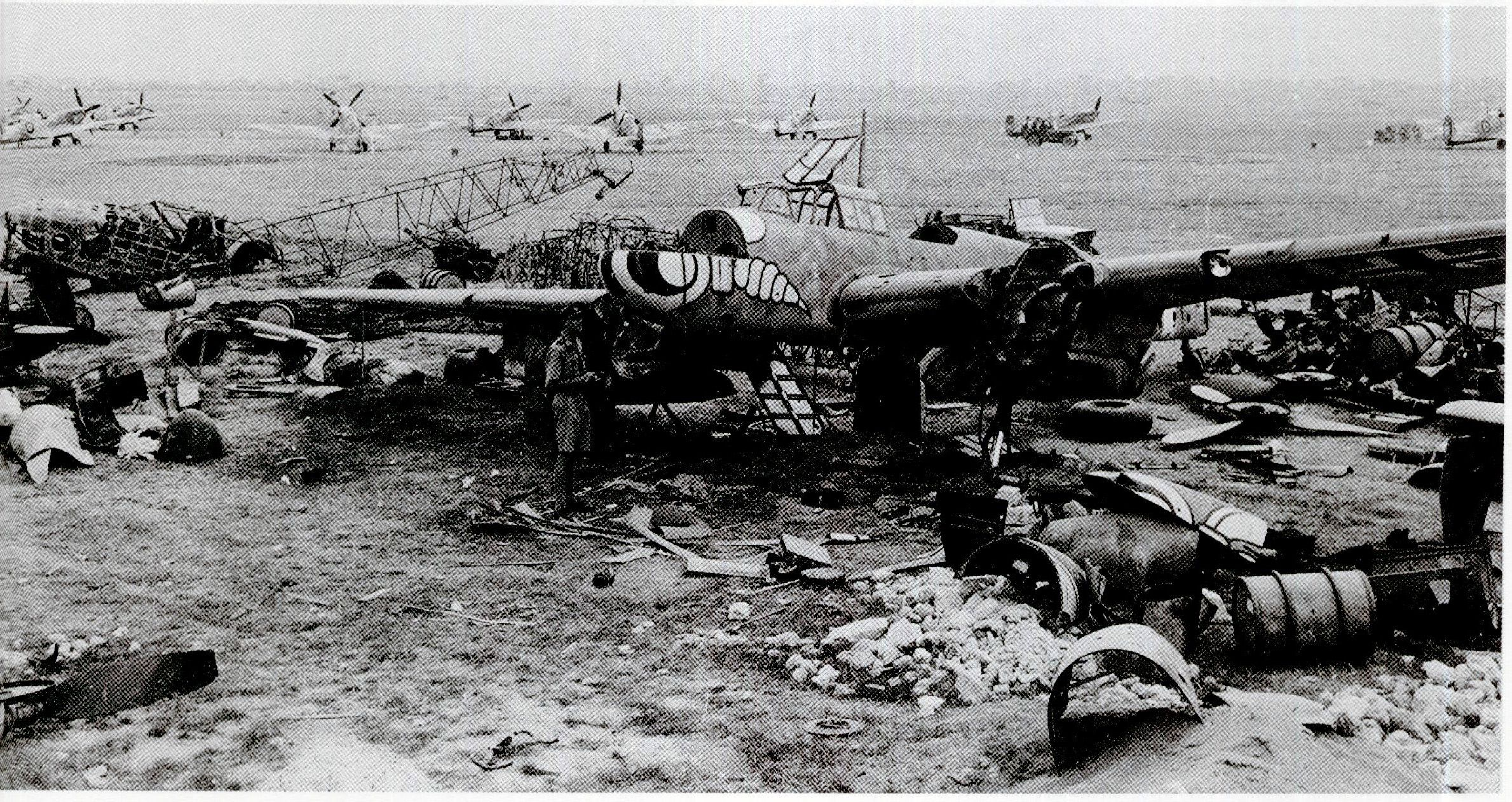


Messerschmitt Bf 110 G-1 trop S9+FM, W.Nr. 6187, of 4./ZG 1, Monte Corvino, September 1943
As with the single-engined fighters, the Luftwaffe's twin-engined heavy fighters were also finished in an RLM 74/75/76 scheme. On this example, however, although the uppersurface of the wings would have been finished in a standard splinter pattern, this does not appear to have included the uppersurface of the fuselage which, instead, is virtually solid RLM 74 on the top decking with mottles on the fuselage sides. Although the engines had been removed when the aircraft was photographed, it is thought that the lower panels of the engine cowlings would have been yellow with the tips of the green RLM spinners in the 4. Staffel colour, white, as shown in the profile, or possibly plain green RLM 70. Note the extent of the overpainting on the fuselage which suggests the machine may have had at least two earlier codes.

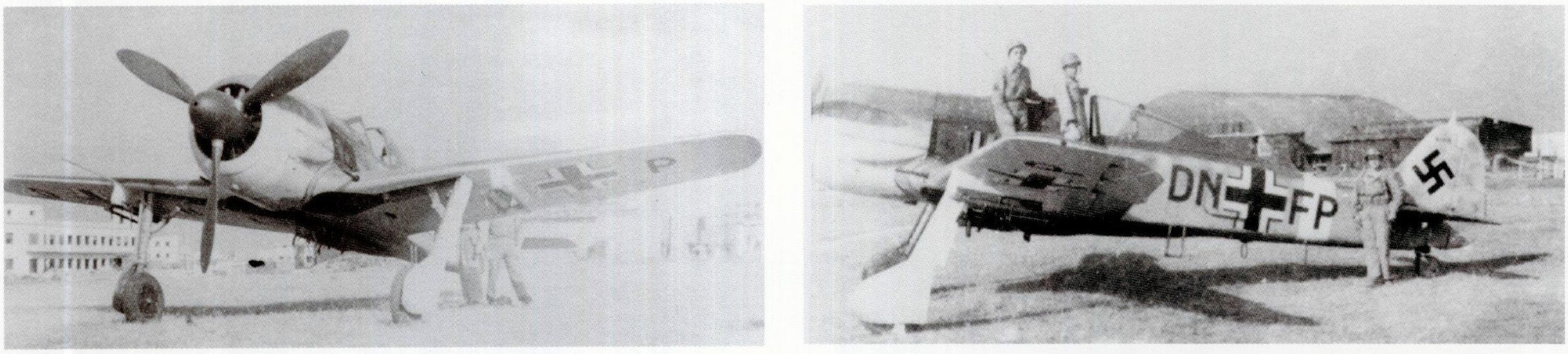




THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Zerstörergeschwader 1 was formed and reformed several times in its history, the second formation being raised in Russia in January 1942 from elements of SKG 210. In March or April 1943, II./ZG 1 converted to the Bf 110 G-1 and G-2 and arrived at Monte Corvino in June. This remained the Gruppe's base until August when it was withdrawn from Italy, leaving behind several aircraft which were later photographed by an advance party of the Royal Air Force's 324 Wing on 11 September 1943 which found a total of 21 Bf 110s on the airfield, some of which were G-2 trops. Known as the 'Wespen', or 'Wasp' Geschwader, the aircraft of ZG 1 invariably carried the unit's colourful stylised wasp decoration on the nose. The missing parts of the decoration may be seen on the gun access panels lying on the ground to the right of the photographs above and below. The machines shown here are W.Nr. 6232, coded S9+AN (*BELOW, BACKGROUND OPPOSITE AND FOREGROUND ABOVE*) with the letter 'A' in red – which was flown by the Staffelkapitän of 5./ZG 1 – and S9+FM , W.Nr. 6187, of 4./ZG 1. Note that the nose panels on S9+AN have come from another aircraft, as shown by the mismatching of the wasp emblem. The Spitfires in the background belonged to 324 Wing.

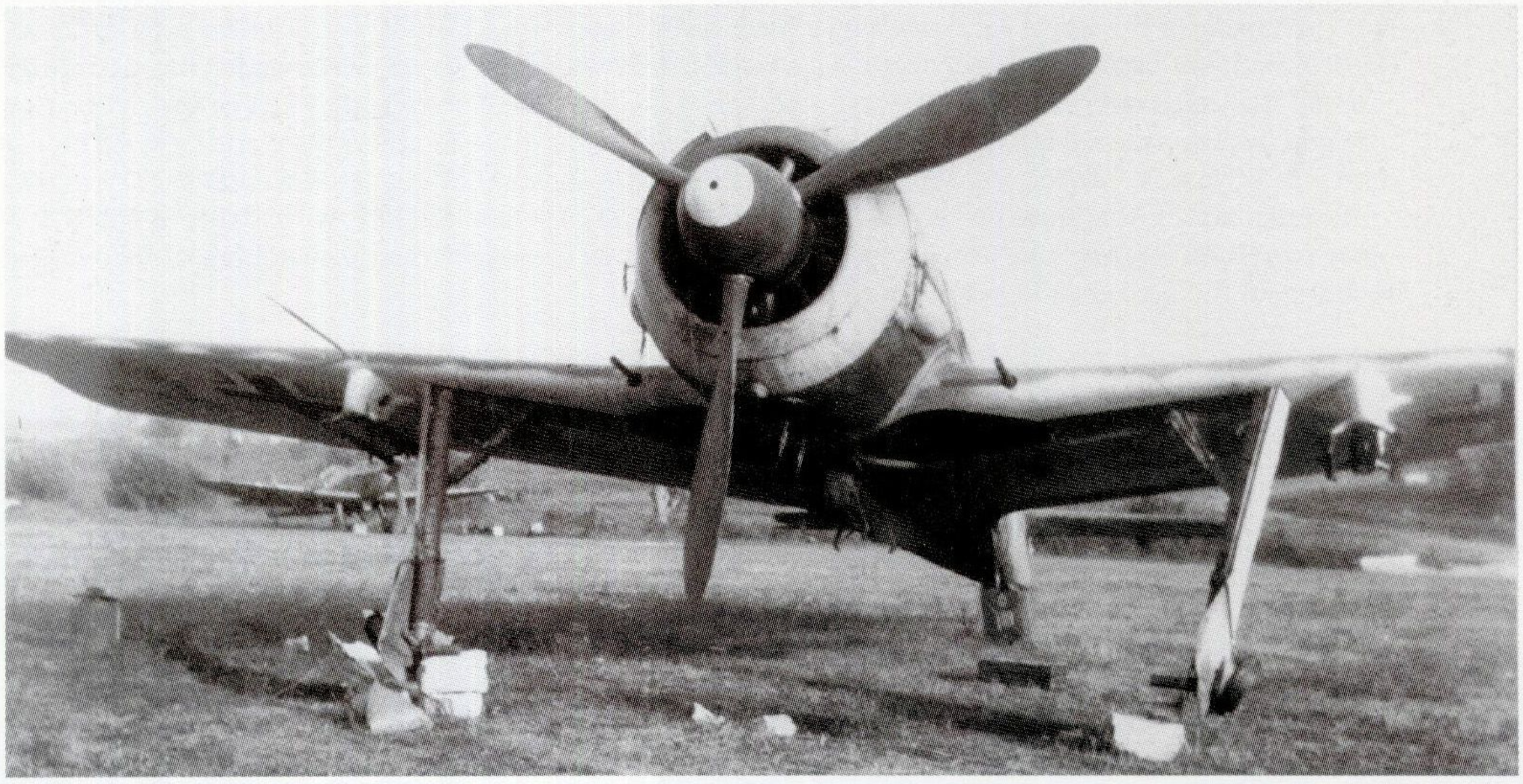


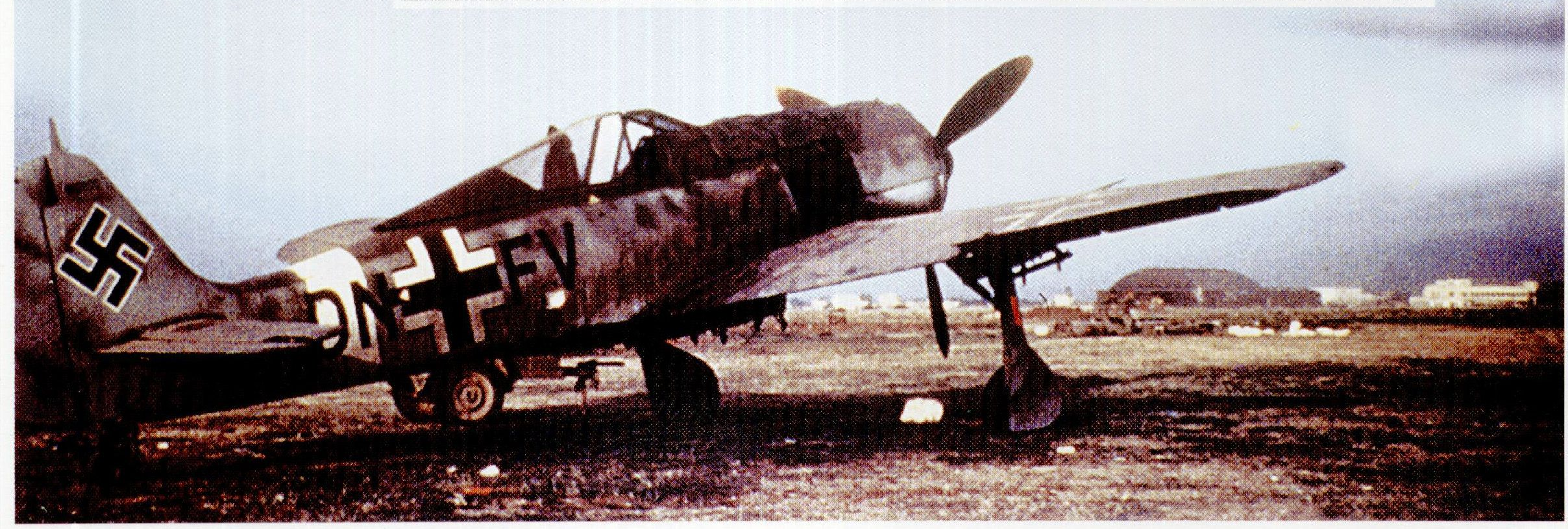
For the camouflage and markings enthusiast, photographs of aircraft still wearing their Stammkennzeichen are rarely inspiring, but these photographs have been included as they provide some interesting examples of the misleading colour information sometimes included in Allied intelligence reports. A case in point concerns the three Fw 190 G-3s coded DN+FP, W.Nr. 160016; DP+HQ, W.Nr. 160043; and CL+WE, W.Nr. 160057 found at Monte Corvino. The last mentioned was stated to have been fitted with two MG 151/20 wing guns, but neither the engine guns nor the two outboard cannon in the wings were fitted and the apertures for the latter were blanked off. Normal armour plate was fitted and the aircraft had been equipped with bomb racks under the fuselage and the wings. All these machines were reported as having their uppersurfaces camouflaged dark blue, yet this is patently incorrect as, in the accompanying photographs showing two of these machines – DN+FP and DP+HQ – it is immediately apparent that the uppersurfaces are painted in the two standard greys, RLM 74 and 75.

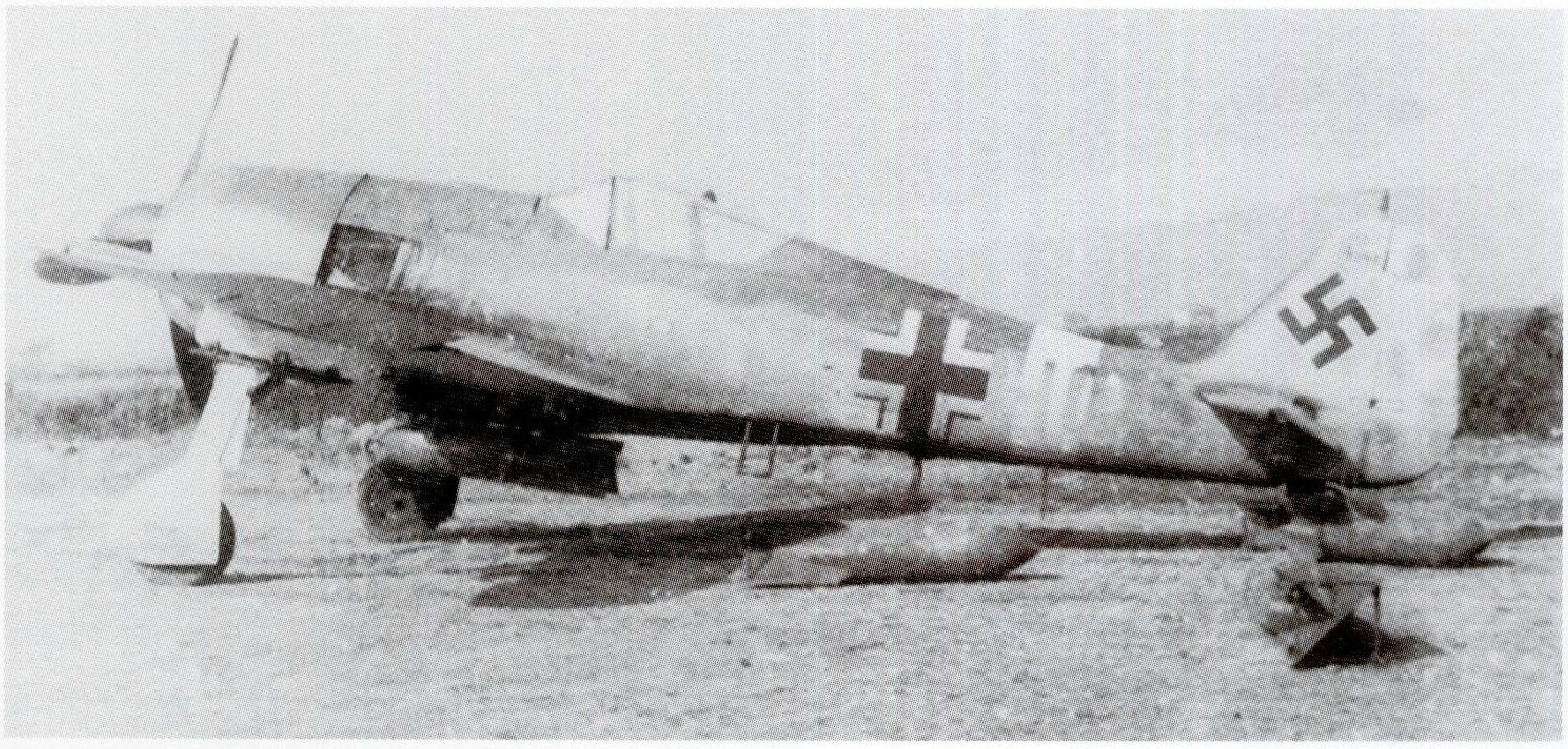


ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: US soldiers inspecting the captured Fw 190 G-3 coded DN+FP. This aircraft was found with a data plate that stated that the Werk Nummer was 160016, although the number 180016 had been incorrectly painted on the fin. This was another of the aircraft found at Monte Corvino which was described, erroneously, as having dark blue uppersurfaces. DN+FP, which was airworthy, was shipped to the United States where it was assigned the US Foreign Evaluation number FE-104, later changed to FE-125. Numerous photographs exist of this aircraft in the US where it was apparently repainted soon after its arrival, but this photograph shows the original camouflage and markings. According to the Allied report on this aircraft, the spinner was black, but it seems in fact to be the same dark green as the propeller blades.

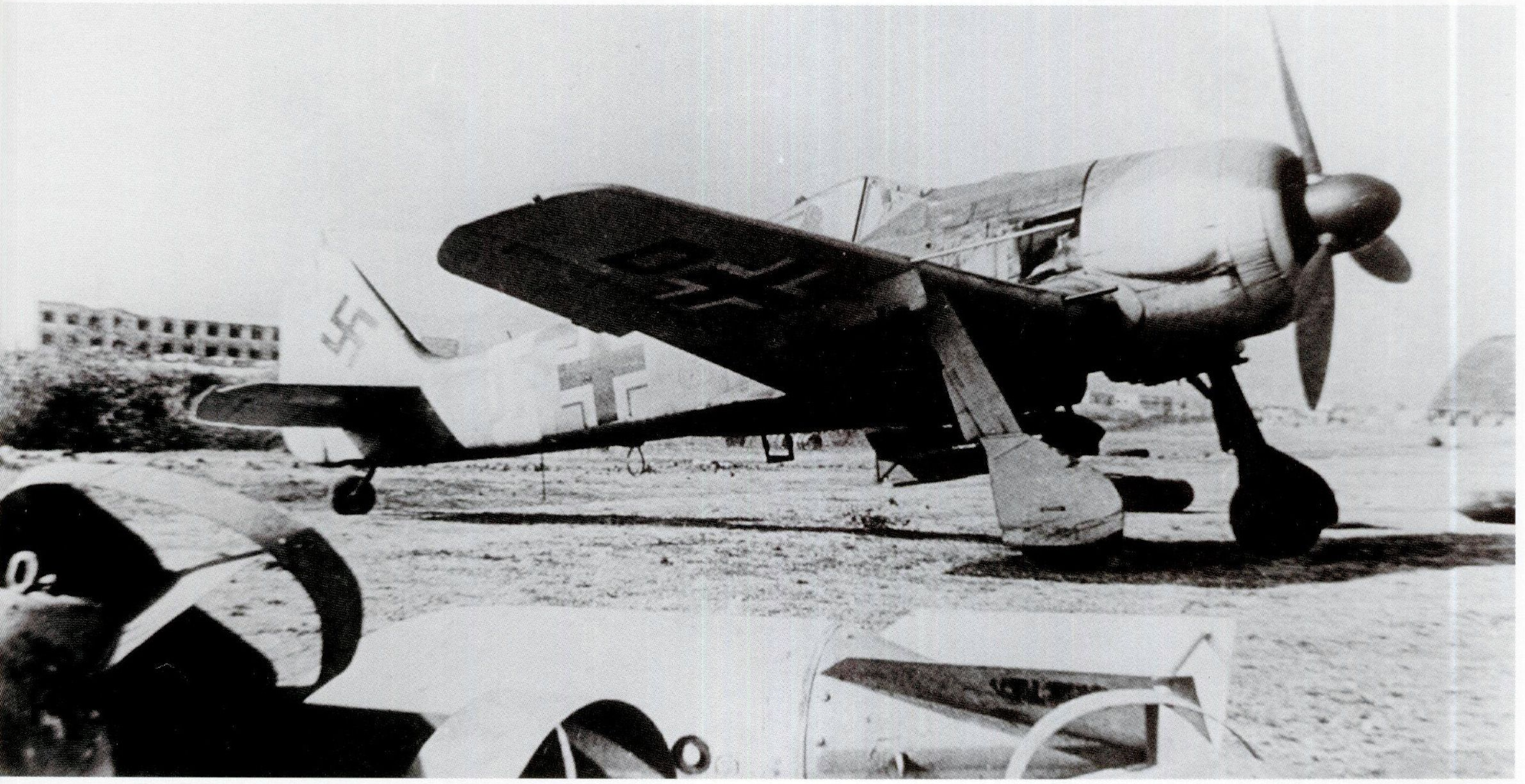
RIGHT AND BELOW: Clearly finished in the same camouflage colours was DN+FV, W.Nr. 160022, but as the colour view shows, the uppersurface camouflage was not a single dark blue, but the two greys, RLM 74 and 75. The description of the undersurfaces, however, given in the contemporary reports as "light blue" is more accurate and corresponds to the light blue-grey, RLM 76. Note the 500 kg type bomb carriers adapted for auxiliary fuel tanks under the fuselage and under each wing.

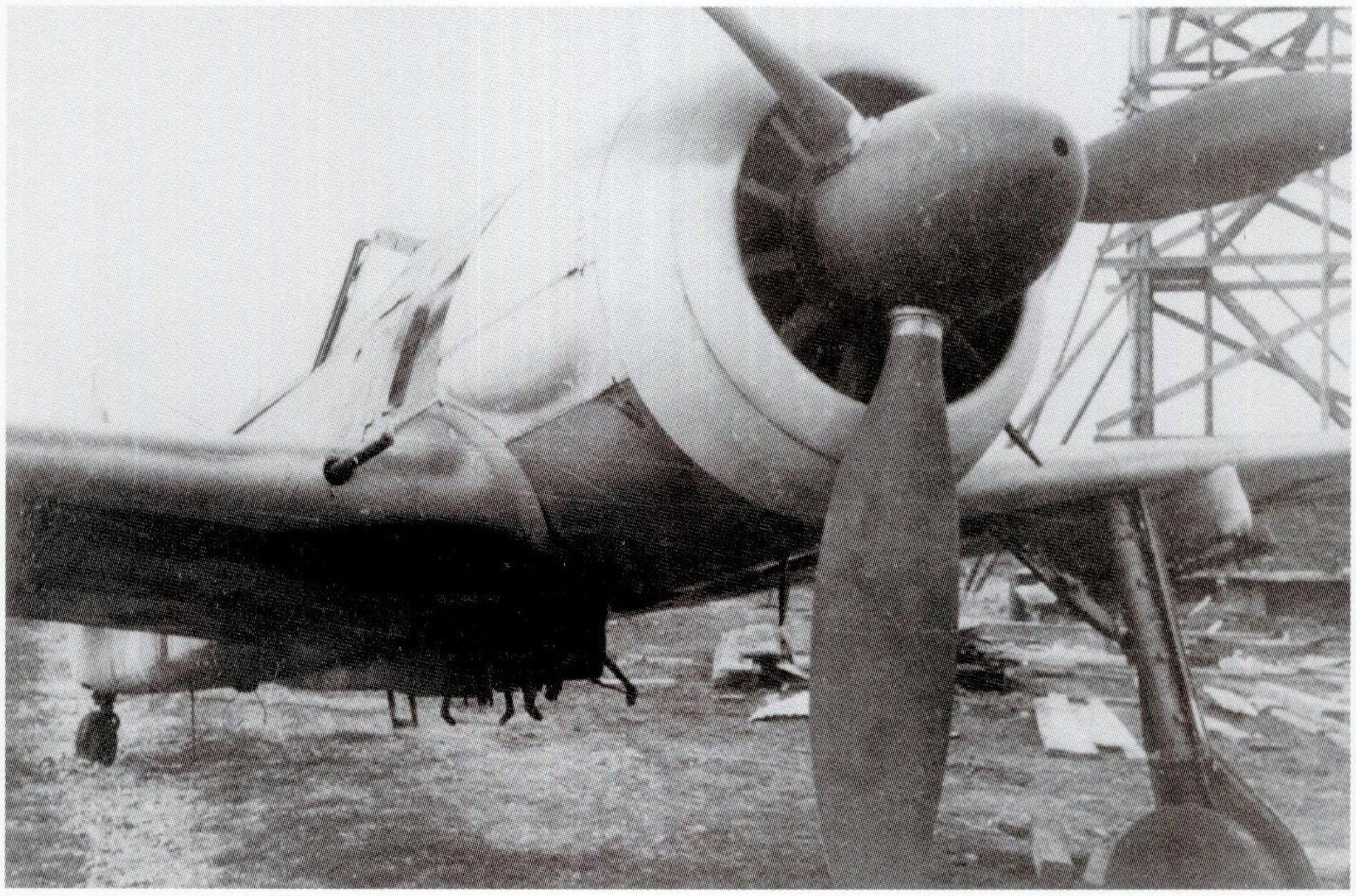




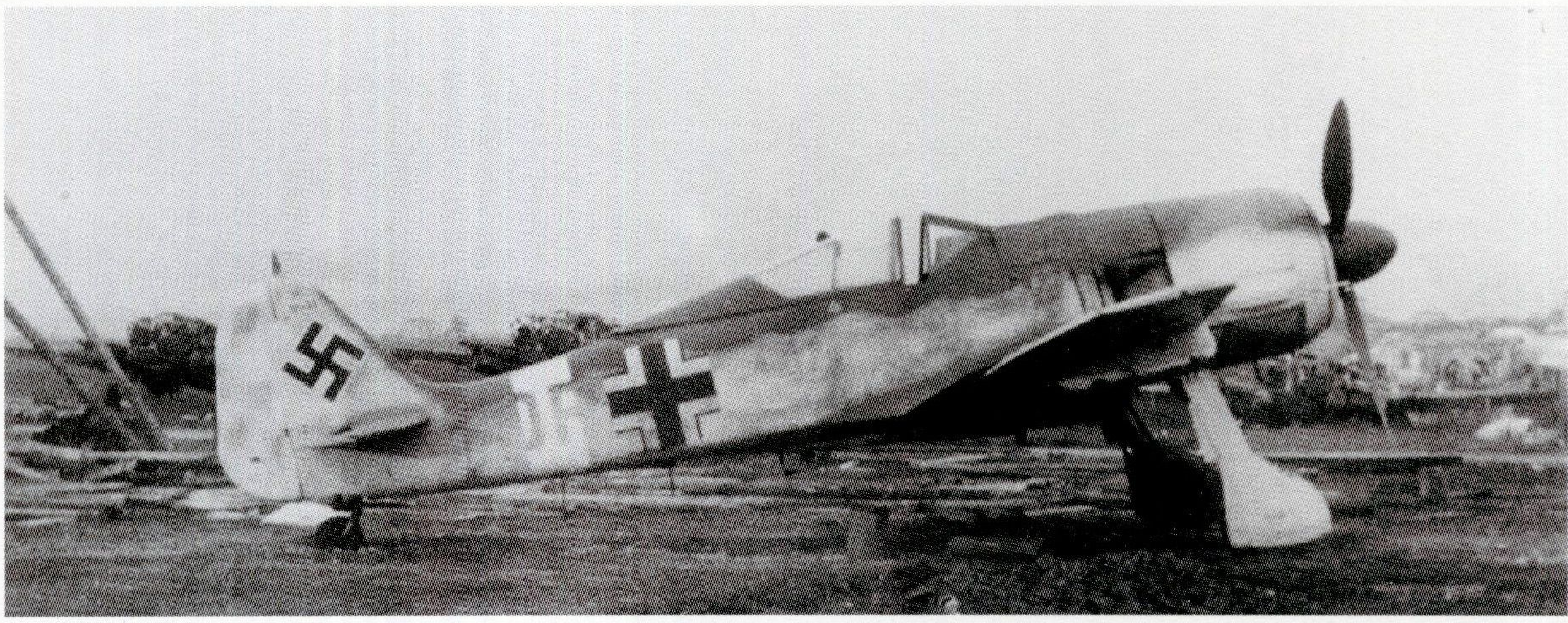


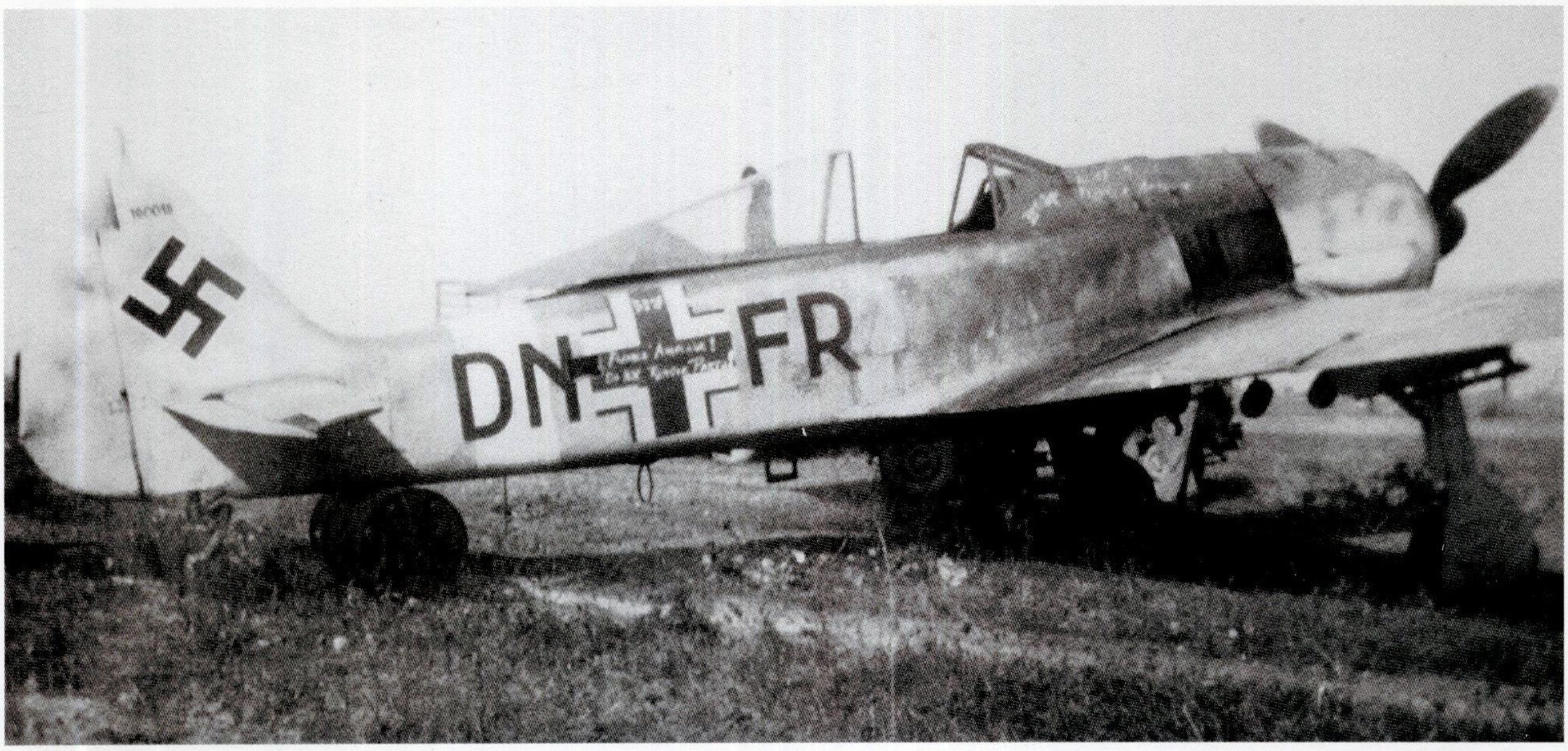
THIS PAGE: Various views of DP+HQ, an Fw 190 G-3, W.Nr 160043, which was evidently still armed when captured at Monte Corvino.



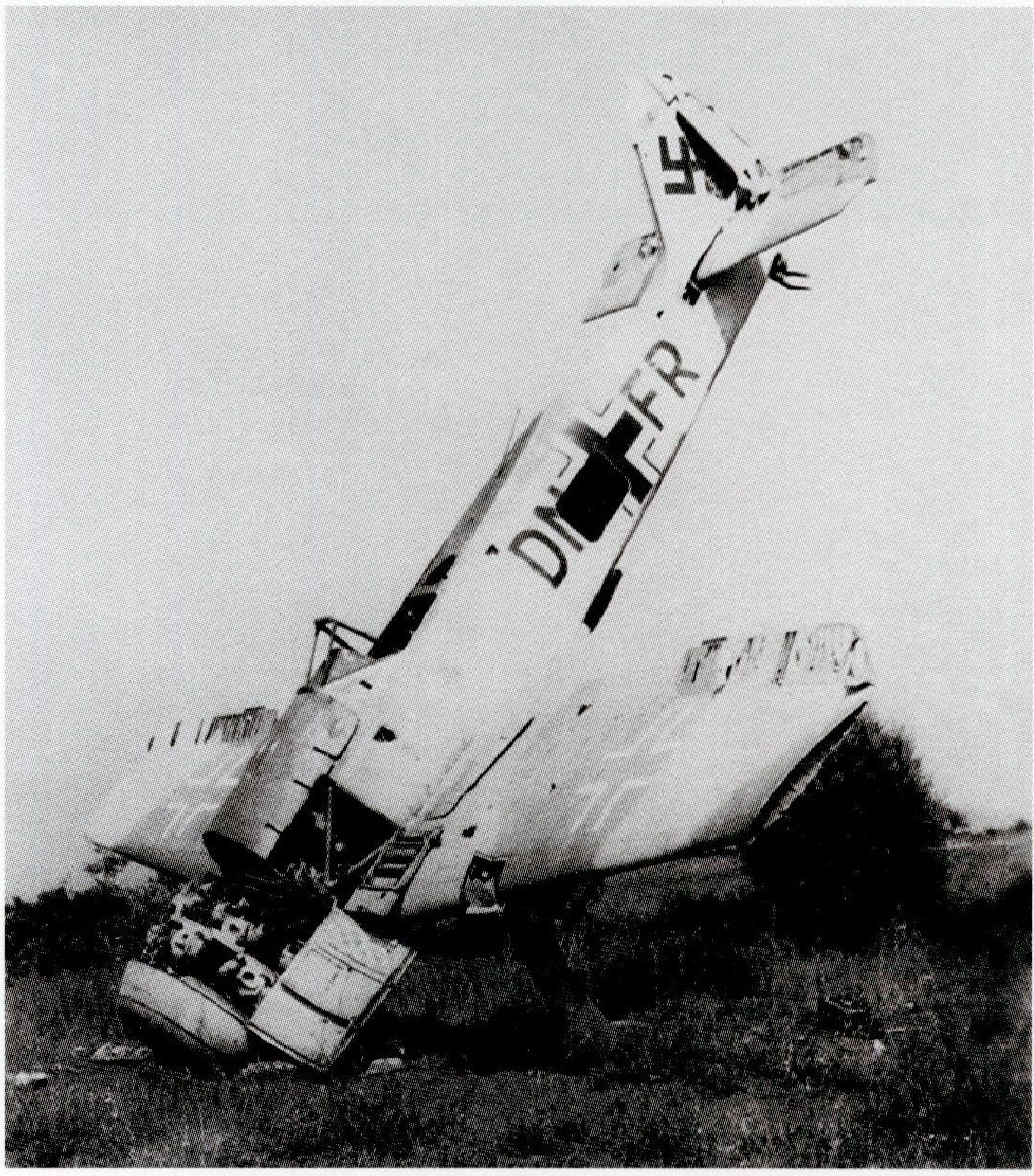


RIGHT: This further view of DP+HQ at Monte Corvino will be of particular value to scale modellers as it shows the 'sit' of the aircraft on the ground. Note in particular the angle of the undercarriage relative to the underside of the wing and the position of the lower edge of the undercarriage fairing relative to the exposed portion of the wheel. Another point of interest is that although the Stammkennzeichen has been removed from the fuselage of this machine, the position of the first two letters, DP, remains clearly identifiable.

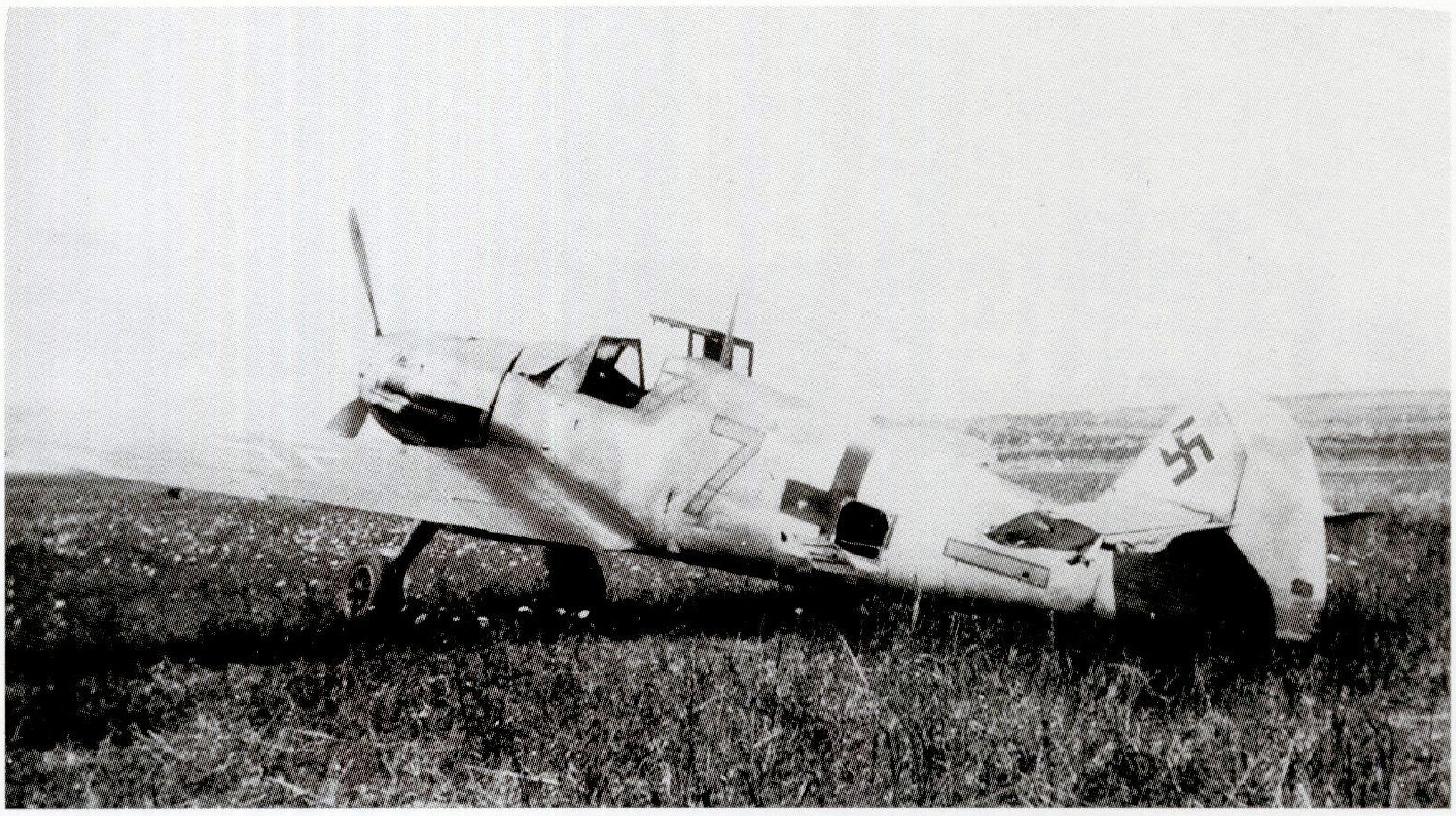


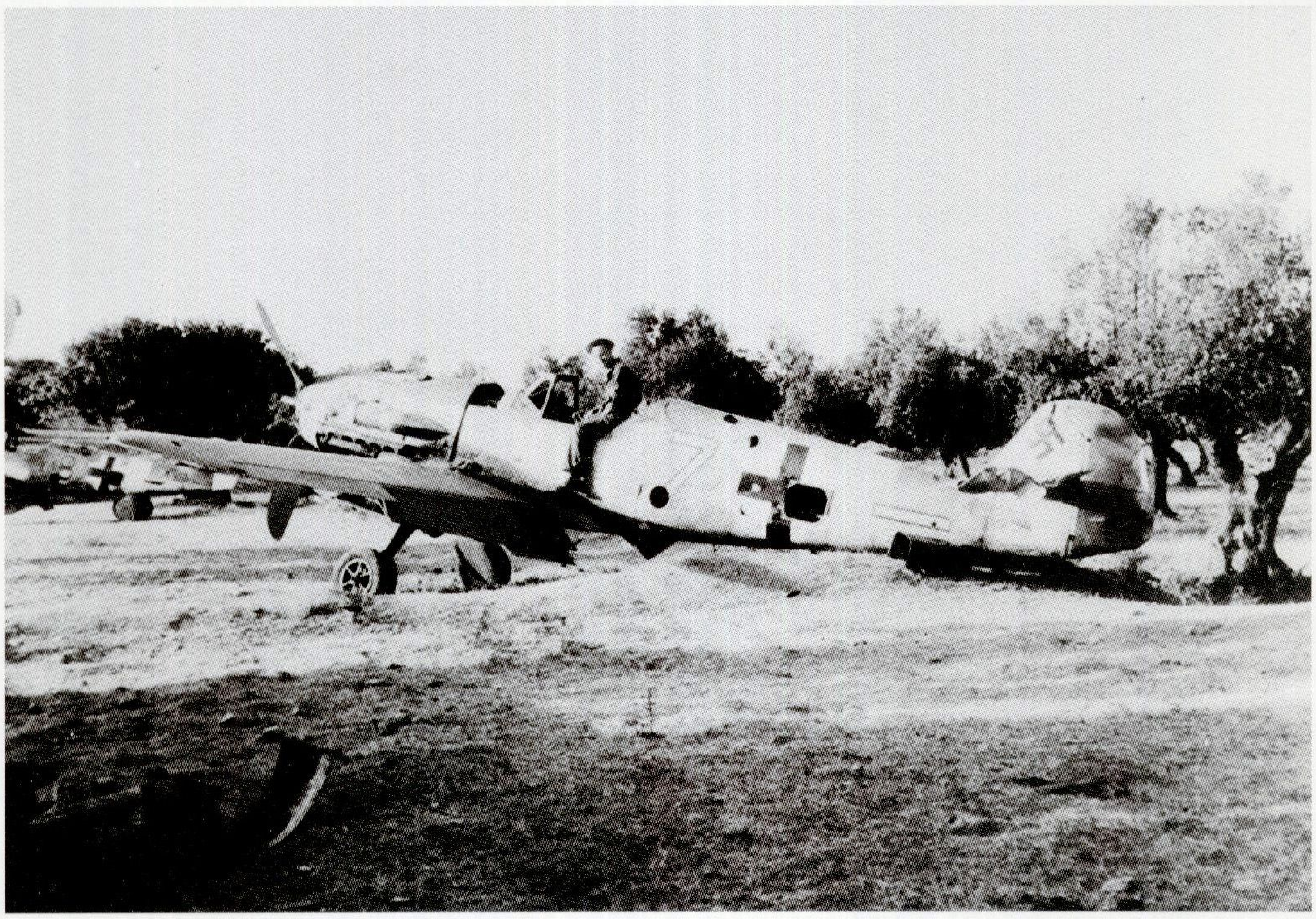


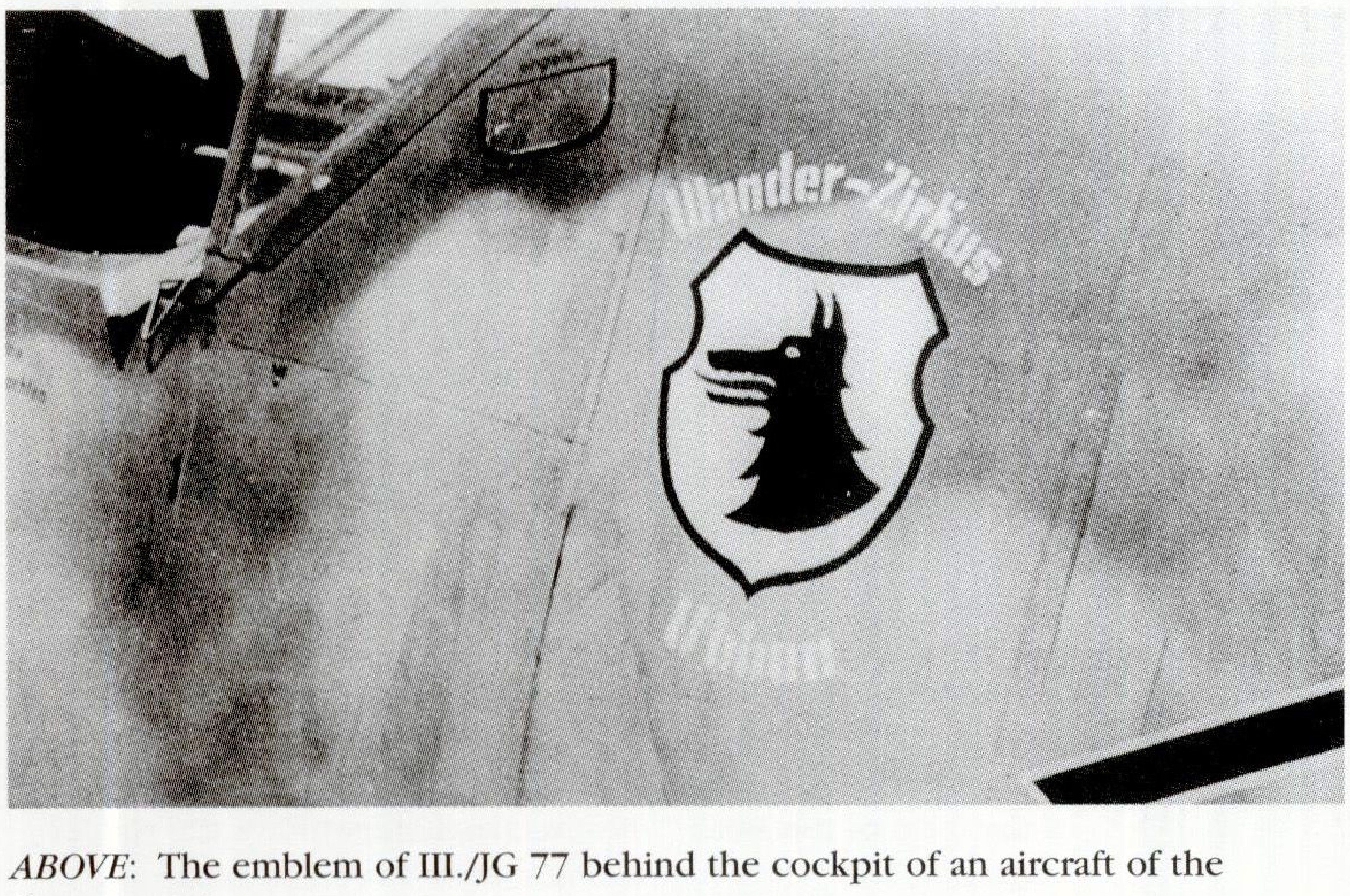
ABOVE AND RIGHT: This aircraft, another Fw 190 G-3, had the Stammkennzeichen DN+FR and was W.Nr. 160018. The machine was fitted with wing racks for bombs or fuel tanks, and has graffiti chalked over the fuselage Balkenkreuz and forward of the windcreen. On the Balkenkreuz, this reads, "33rd Grp. Flyable Airplane! Do not Remove Parts!" It will be noted, however, that the tailwheel is already missing and when this aircraft was later examined by Allied Intelligence personnel, it was noted that much equipment was missing. Just how ineffective the notice not to remove parts was may be seen in the photograph (*RIGHT*) of the same machine taken a short time later..

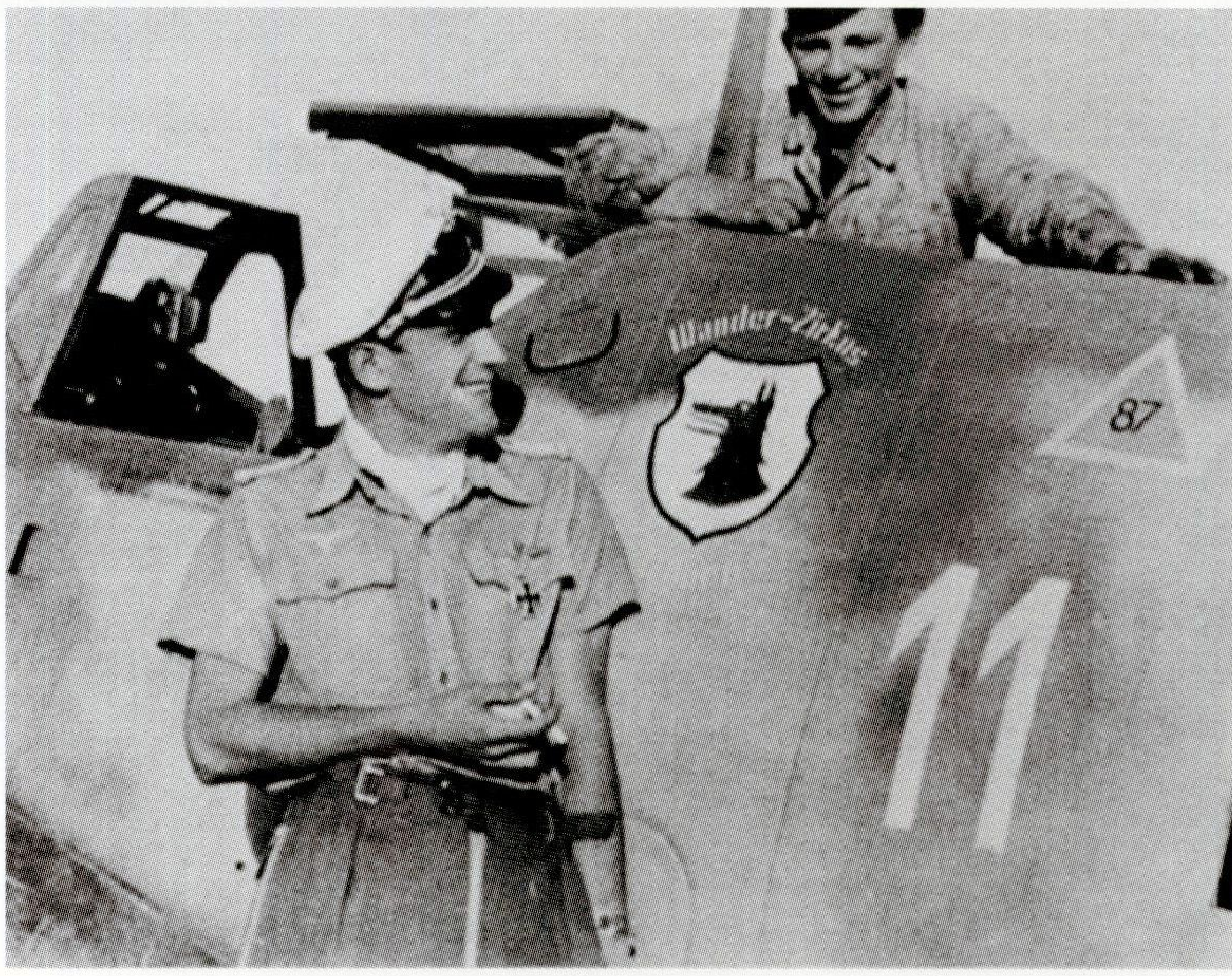


BELOW AND RIGHT: Although the majority of Luftwaffe Bf 109s in Sicily were G-6s, a number of the earlier G-2 and G-4 versions were also found. Note that this 'Yellow 7' is one such aircraft and lacks the fuselage blisters and smooth wheel hubs of the later G-6. Just visible on the engine cowling is the Geschwader's Ace of Spades badge. Note also the spoked wheel hubs.





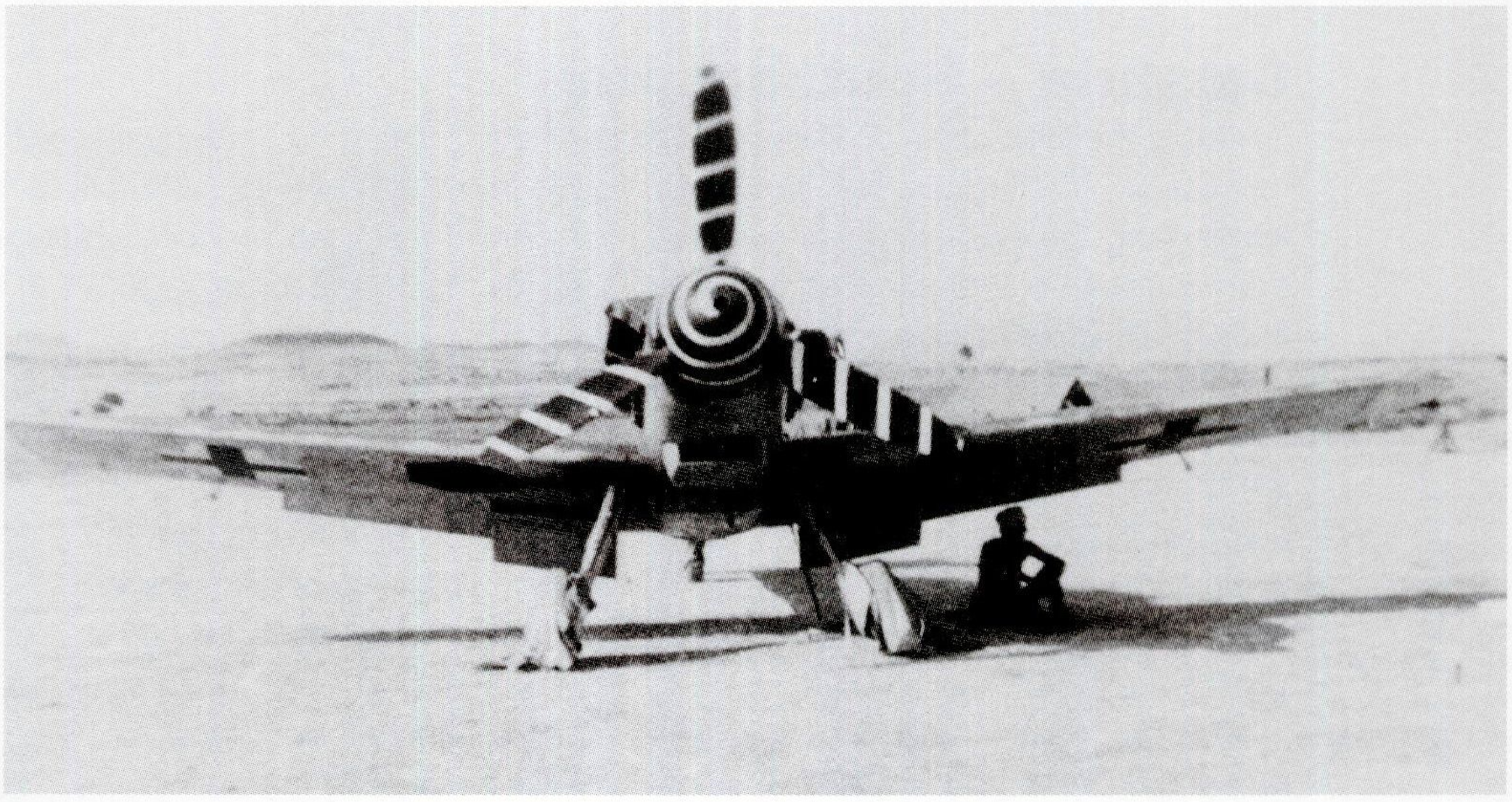




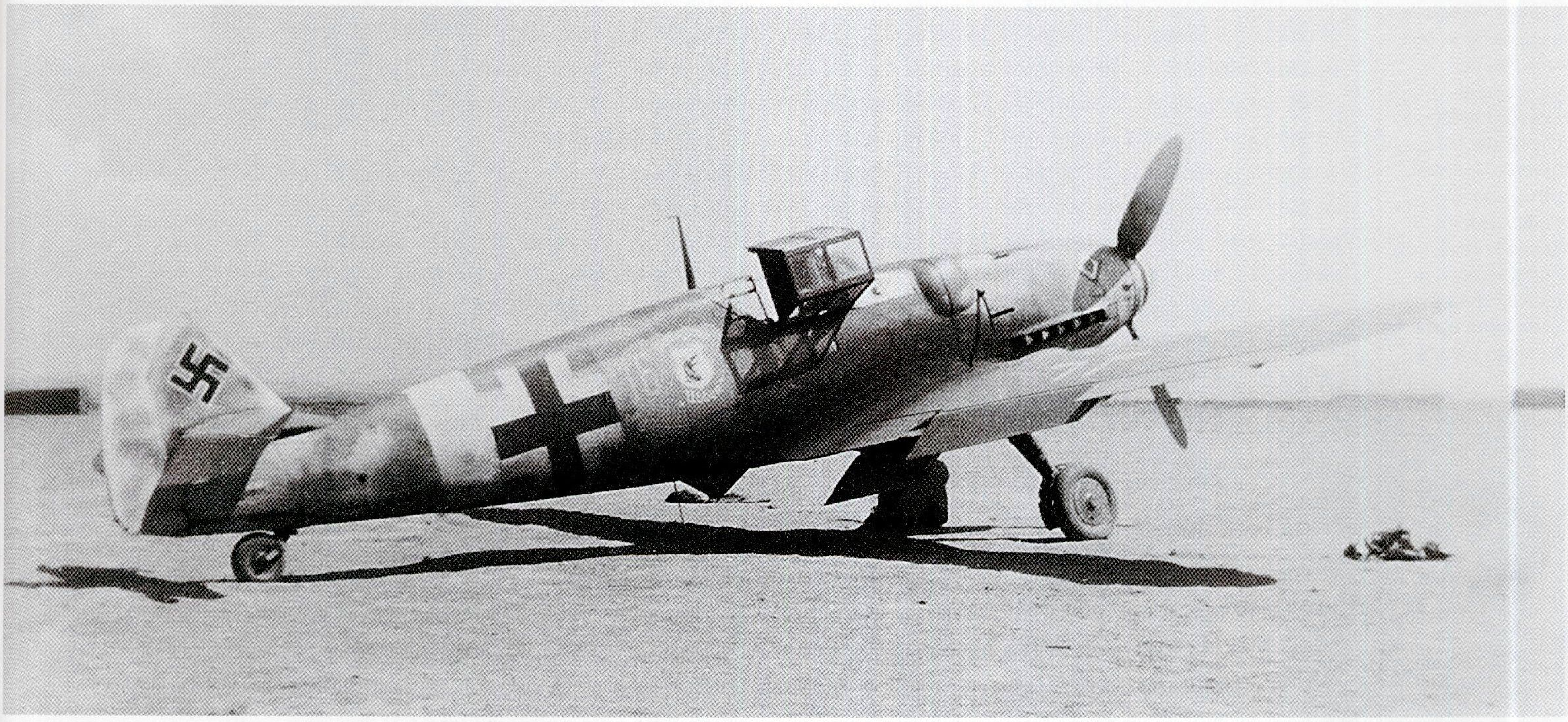
ABOVE: The emblem of III./JG 77 behind the cockpit of an aircraft of the Gruppenstab.

RIGHT: Oblt. Erhard Niese, Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 77, pictured in the summer of 1943 with 'White 11'.

RIGHT: Seen at Chilivani in the summer of 1943, this photograph shows the front of the aircraft known to have been flown by Oblt. Wolfgang Ernst, Staffelkapitän of 9/JG 77. Given the location and date, it is believed that this is the same aircraft as shown below.

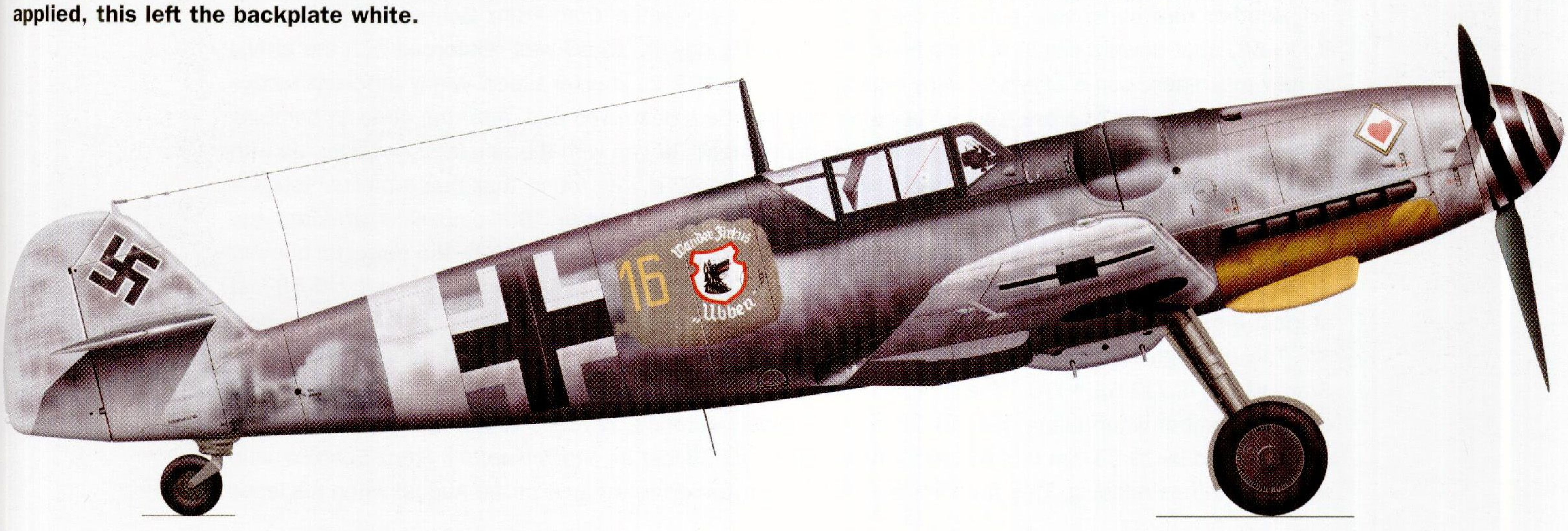


BELOW: Armed, refuelled and with the inertia starter handle protruding from the engine cowling, this aircraft, a Bf 109 G-6, 'Yellow 16' of 9./JG 77, is obviously ready for an Alarmstart. This photograph was taken at Chilivani in Sardinia, the base of III./JG 77 during the summer of 1943. Note that the small aircraft number and the 'Wander-Zirkus Ubben' unit emblem on the fuselage both appear on a patch of newly-applied camouflage where an earlier identity has been painted out.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Yellow 16' of 9./JG 77, Chilivani, July 1943

This aircraft was finished in a fairly standard scheme of RLM 74, 75 and 76 but with the RLM 76 fuselage sides camouflaged with RLM 75 stripes rather than the more usual mottled pattern. Note that the spinner on this aircraft was originally white and that, when it was removed from the aircraft so that the black and white spiral could be applied, this left the backplate white.

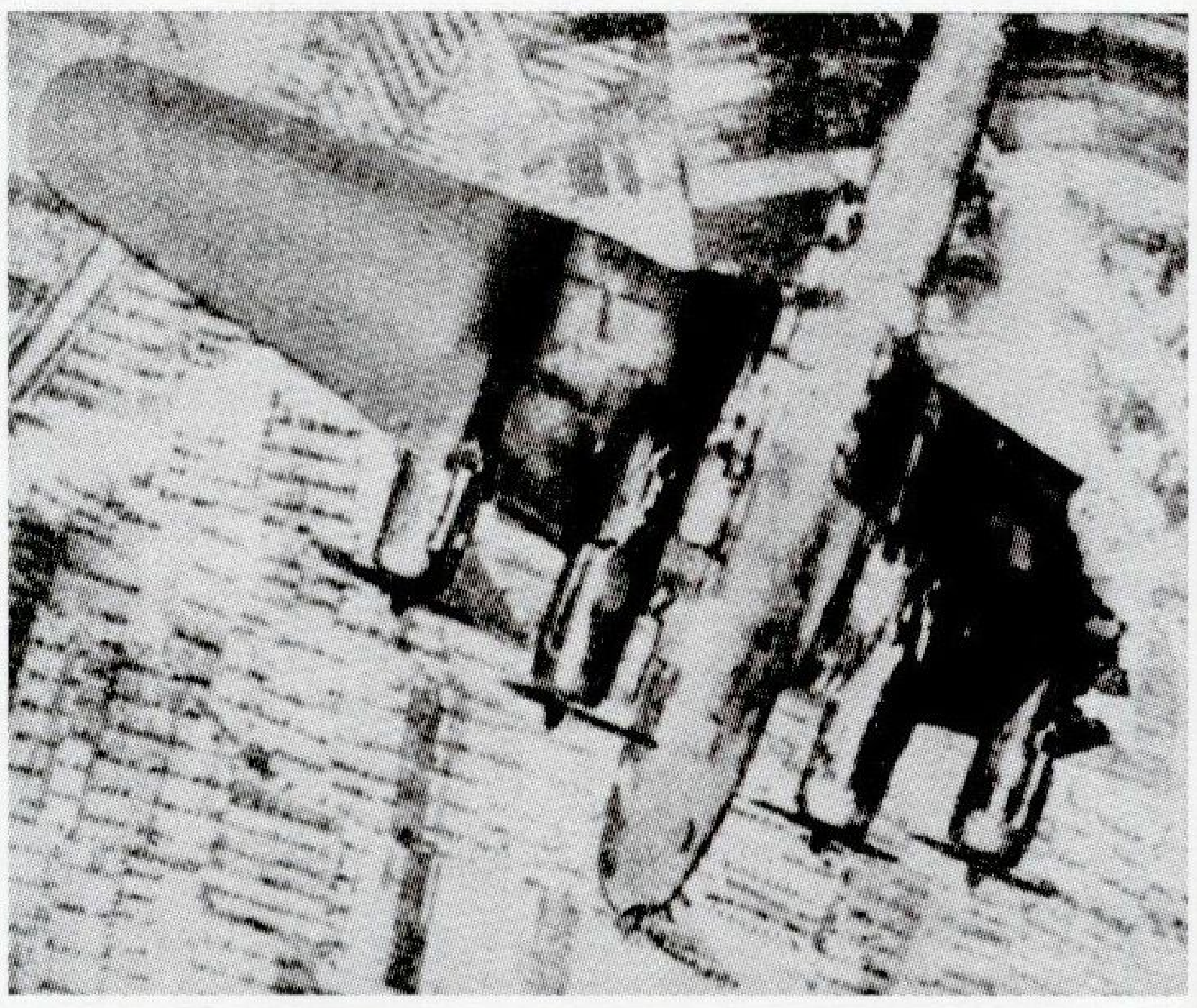


Calabria – Southern Italy

Following the evacuation of Sicily, the German fighter units had to reorganise yet again for, as already mentioned, material losses had been heavy, a number of valuable pilots had been lost and, additionally, the evacuation had disrupted the ground staff and servicing organisation. On 19 August, the dismissed Heinz Bär was finally replaced as *Kommandeur* of I./JG 77 by *Hptm.* Lutz-Wilhelm Burckhardt who had previously led 4./JG 77 in North Africa but had been hospitalised following serious wounds sustained when, during the general retreat in North Africa, he had stepped on a mine.

At that time, while III./JG 77 remained in Sardinia, the rest of Steinhoff's JG 77 was in the process of moving to defend the area of Foggia, for which purpose it was strengthened by IV./JG 3, which then came under the command of *Stab*/JG 77. Von Maltzahn's JG 53 was dispersed around Naples with I./JG 53 at San Severo, II./JG 53 at Cancello and III./JG 53 at Grazzanise.

Meanwhile, the Allied air forces allowed the exhausted *Jagdgruppen* no rest and on 19 August II./JG 77 took off to engage an enemy formation over the Gulf of Eufemia. On this occasion the *Gruppe* suffered no losses and claimed no fewer than nine P-51s, one of them by *Oblt.* Hrdlicka, who had quickly returned to the *Gruppe* after his forced landing on 1 August, as his 36th *Luftsieg*. This, however, is a case of misidentification as the first fighter versions of the P-51, the B and C, did not appear in Italy until 1944. Also on the 19th, *Uffz.* Erhard Philipp of 6./JG 77 was credited with his sixth victory. This young pilot from the Sudetenland – the western border of Czechoslovakia which had been annexed to the *Reich* in 1938 – had arrived with the *'Herz As' Geschwader* at the beginning of the year and had claimed his first victories when the unit was based in Tunisia and, in spite of the unfavourable odds resulting from Allied air superiority, had shot down three aircraft during the Sicilian campaign. JG 53 was also engaged but lost *Uffz.* Jens Bahnsen of 8./JG 53 who, although not well-known, was a valuable pilot credited with 18 victories. Bahnsen was just one of the many talented and experienced pilots that formed the core of a fighter force which was being constantly weakened in the battle against superior forces.



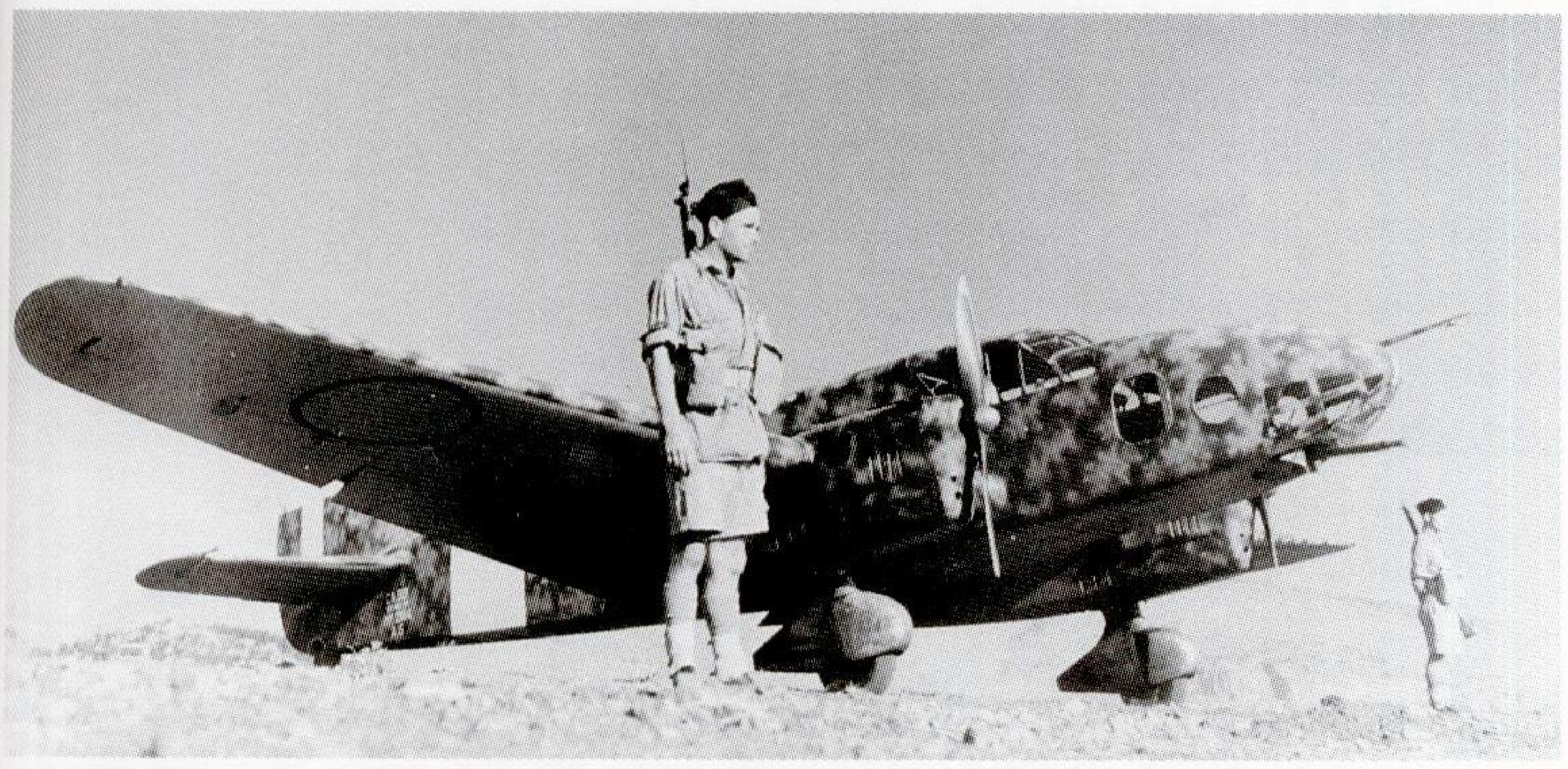
ABOVE: Five of the crew succeed in baling out of this B-17 which was shot down by flak near Naples.

BELOW: Theodor Lindemann first flew with JG 26 and became Adjutant to the Kommodore of JG 77, Johannes Steinhoff, in 1943. While on a test flight with Steinhoff on 25 August 1943, the two pilots encountered a flight of P-38s near Foggia, and in the subsequent engagement Steinhoff claimed four of the US fighters, bringing his tally to 164, while Lindemann claimed one as his fourth victory. In January 1944, Lindemann became Kommandeur of I./JG 77.

A rare and interesting fight occurred on 25 August when the *Kommodore* of JG 77, Johannes Steinhoff, and his wingman and *Adjutant*, *Oblt.* Theodor Lindemann, a veteran previously with JG 26, took off to flight test a pair of Bf 109s. While returning to Foggia, they noticed a large formation of P-38s, which they attacked, Steinhoff claiming four Lightnings destroyed, bringing his total to 164, while his *Adjutant* claimed one as his fourth victory. Also on that date, I./JG 77 and IV./JG 3 were in action against a formation of B-17s, during which *Lt.* Herbert Kutscha, the *Staffelkapitän* of 12./JG 3, destroyed a Flying Fortress as his 29th *Luftsieg*, his fifth as a member of IV./JG 3, when he scored a direct hit on the bomber with his 21 cm mortars. Kutscha had a varied career in the *Luftwaffe*, beginning the war with II./JG 77 before becoming a *Zerstörer* pilot with II./ZG 1. He had been credited with a Swiss Bf 109 in an engagement over Switzerland, was later in action in Russia with SKG 210 and, before transferring to JG 3, had received the *Ritterkreuz* on 24 September 1942 for his 22 aerial victories and the numerous vehicles and military material he had destroyed on the ground.

Another rare claim was submitted on 23 August 1943 when *Oblt.* Franz Schiess, the leader of 8./JG 53, shot down a Catalina flying-boat. The following day, II./JG 53 was reinforced with the arrival of new machines, some of which were equipped with the BR 21 mortar tubes. Many different tactics were tried in order to improve the number of enemy bombers destroyed and, after the air-to-air bombing of the Flying Fortresses boxes was abandoned, experiments began with the mortars. However, as with similar trials on the Channel Front and over Germany itself, it was found that these mortar tubes – variously known as *'Fernröhre'*, 'Telescopes', or *'Ofenröhre'*, literally 'Stovepipes' – affected the performance of the Bf 109s and placed them at a disadvantage when attacked by the powerful bomber escorts. A further setback occurred on the 26th when Cancello was heavily bombed and II./JG 53 lost at least eleven aircraft with the result that its operations in the following days were drastically reduced.

The day fighters were more successful on 30 August when, in a combined operation involving *Stab*/JG 77, III./JG 53, I./JG 77 and IV./JG 3, pilots claimed no fewer than 16 P-38s. This was followed on 2 September when pilots of I./JG 77 claimed seven victories, IV./JG 3 claimed five and four more were claimed by JG 53. On this occasion, however, 8./JG 53 lost its *Staffelkapitän*, Franz Schiess, who was reported as missing. This Austrian pilot had only returned to the unit on 19 August when his leave



ABOVE: Allied soldiers standing guard over an Italian Ca 309, serial number MM12664, which was flown by defectors escaping from the Italian mainland to Palermo in Sicily on 10 September 1943. The occupants of this aircraft were fortunate as some others were shot down by the Luftwaffe.

destroying the locomotive and some wagons on which were mounted anti-aircraft guns.

On the 10th, Allied bombers attacked German airfields by day and night and many more aircraft were destroyed on the ground. In one loss that day which was not the result of direct action, *Oblt.* Dietrich Kasten, *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 53, took off alone from Montesano to ferry a Bf 109 G to Foggia but failed to arrive. Kasten, who had been credited with 19 victories, was reported missing.

On Sardinia, III./JG 77 remained relatively inactive throughout this period. Since the loss of North Africa, the German high command had been encouraged by a number of Allied deceptions to believe that they would invade Sardinia or Corsica before attacking the Italian mainland itself and had therefore held a number of troops and air force units on these islands to meet such an eventuality. Following the invasion of Sicily and the landings at Reggio di Calabria and Salerno, however, it became obvious that the Allies had no intention of taking Sardinia in the immediate future and troops who could be better used in the fighting in Italy were ordered to be evacuated. III./JG 77 was ordered to cover the evacuation and transferred first to the airfield at Ghisonnaccia in Corsica and then to Casabianda in the north of the island where it would be better placed to escort the fleets of Ju 52s which were to take part in the evacuation.

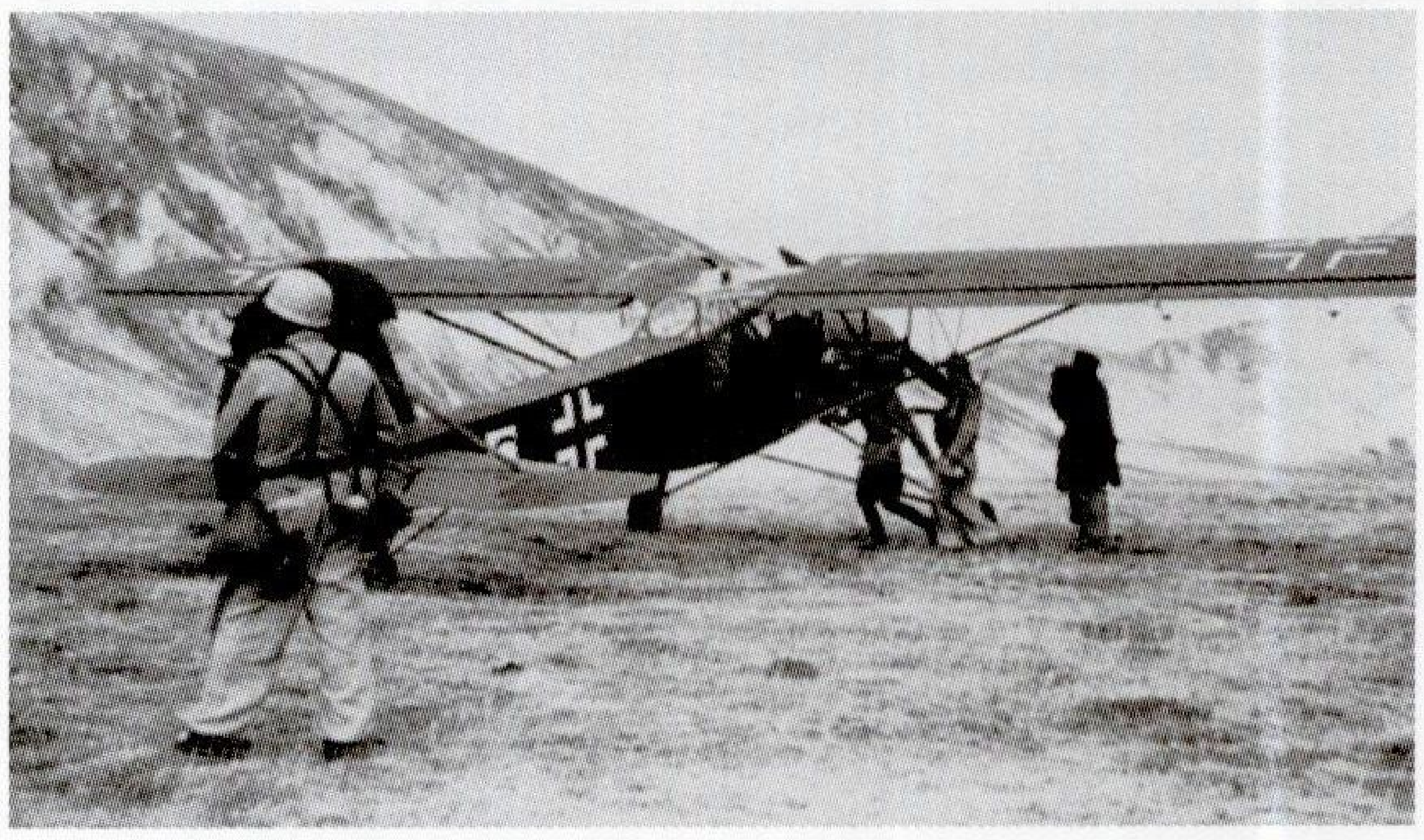
On the 12th, German paratroops assisted by SS *Sturmbannführer* Otto Skorzeny landed by glider on Gran Sasso mountain and liberated Mussolini. Later, the *Duce* would create the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, or Italian Social Fascist Republic which, with troops loyal to him, would continue the fight alongside Germany. On 16 July 1943, advance units of Eighth Army made contact with the Allied forces which had landed at Salerno and Kesselring began to withdraw cautiously northwards to his main defensive position, the Gustav Line, which ran along the rivers Garigliano and Sangro. All southern Italy was now lost to the Germans.

The German fighter forces were now only rarely engaged in defensive tasks, their main actions being in an offensive capacity in which they strafed troop columns or escorted the aircraft of IV./JG 3 which attacked the landing fleet with bombs and mortars. Although some Allied transport was destroyed, the results were negligible and they were, moreover, outnumbered by superior Allied forces which engaged them in the air, so that after about a week JG 53 had claimed only seven victories but lost four pilots and more than twenty aircraft. In addition, IV./JG 3 lost two pilots while engaged in ground-attack missions over the beaches and only shot down two enemy aircraft, while I./JG 77, the only *Gruppe* of that *Geschwader* engaged in the Salerno fighting, lost three pilots and around ten aircraft in return for three *Luftsiege* which included a Spitfire shot down by *Hptm.* Burckhardt on the 16th as his 55th victory. III./JG 77 lost a single pilot near Sardinia on the 14th, apparently shot down while escorting transport aircraft.

In the eastern Mediterranean, the disarming of the Italian troops did not proceed as smoothly as in Italy or Southern France. Although the Italian garrisons on the island of Rhodes and the Greek mainland were quickly overrun, troops based on Cephalonia resisted in the hope of making contact with Allied forces. German mountain troops, supported by the *Luftwaffe*, landed on the island and the Italian *Divisione Acqui* was crushed, many of its officers and men being shot by the Germans as traitors and deserters.

It seems probable that IV./JG 27 was not engaged in these operations as the range of its Bf 109s was too limited and instead,

ABOVE AND BELOW: After Benito Mussolini fell from power and was arrested by the Italians, he was taken to a small hotel on the Gran Sasso, high in the Abruzzi mountains. Once he had been located, a rescue operation was planned in which 90 German parachute troops from the Fallschirmjäger Lehr Battalion under the command of Major Harald Mors, accompanied by SS Sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny and 16 Waffen-SS men, would land by glider to rescue him. The operation, carried out on 12 September, was a complete success and here Mussolini is seen posing with some of his rescuers before he, accompanied by Skorzeny, was flown to safety in a Fieseler Storch (*BELOW*). The propaganda value of this operation was immense and although the Luftwaffe was responsible for most of the planning, it was Skorzeny and his SS men who most featured in the media.



the German invasion fleet was protected mainly by Ju 87s and the Ar 196 floatplanes of *Seeaufklärungsgruppe* 126. Therefore, IV./JG 27, under the temporary leadership of *Oblt.* Dietrich Bössler and *Oblt.* Alfred Burk, concentrated its actions against the Greek islands of Cos, Leros and Samos in the Dodecanese where British troops landed to reinforce the local Italian garrisons. This British operation, launched against the wishes of the US, was intended to establish a British foothold in the Balkans, and for a while the attentions of *Heeresgruppe* E in Greece were diverted to securing its western flank before it could attack in the eastern Mediterranean.

A New Retreat

On 18 September, as part of his plan to withdraw slowly to the Gustav Line, *Generalfeldmarschall* Kesselring ordered a retreat to the line Naples – Bari. JG 53 had already moved northwards and I./JG 77 would follow soon afterwards, but first it launched a few final attacks in the Salerno area, probably to cover the retreat. On the 20th, I./JG 77 transferred to Tuscania while *Stab*/JG 77 took over the previous headquarters of KG 30 at Viterbo.

By this time the German high command considered the units engaged in the Defence of the *Reich*, and those being readied to oppose a likely invasion in the West, to be of greater priority than the defence of Italy and, indeed, another *Gruppe*, IV./JG 3, was withdrawn to Germany for *Reichsverteidigung* duties. By this time, the German fighter forces remaining in Italy had already been drastically weakened since, on the night of the 16th, II./JG 53 had been bombed at Littoria and lost around 13 aircraft, while on the following day, the 17th, III./JG 53 had been subjected to a massive bombing attack on its airfield at Ciampino, during which the majority of its fighters were destroyed. Thereafter, III./JG 53 handed over its surviving aircraft to I./JG 53 and moved to San Lorenzo where it did not become operational again for some considerable time.

Meanwhile, III./JG 77 was heavily engaged in the evacuation of Corsica, operating mainly between the island itself and the airfield at Pisa on the Italian mainland, during which the *Gruppe's* Bf 109s sometimes succeeded in intercepting RAF Beaufighters which were patrolling in search of Ju 52 and Me 323 transport aircraft. On 24 September, *Fhj.* Hans Werner Renzow of 8./JG 77 claimed one of these twin-engined aircraft as his sixth victory, and the following day, the *Kommandeur*, *Major* Ubben, shot down another Beaufighter as his 110th. Conversely, the *Gruppe* lost four men in these escort flights, mainly for unknown reasons, possibly the result of mechanical failure. Another important pilot wounded on 25 September was the *Expert* Eduard Isken of 7./JG 77, who was shot down near Modena while attacking B-17s. As a result, he left the unit to recover and later spent some time as an instructor.

ABOVE: Using the terrain in Italy to their advantage, the Germans slowed the Allied advance with skilful delaying actions, particularly in the Italian mountains where gradients were steep and passes narrow and tortuous. This wounded German prisoner is being taken to the rear of Fifth Army during the fighting in the heights around Salerno, but in some areas of fighting the terrain was too much even for jeeps, and mechanisation gave way to the mule. Sometimes thousands of these animals were used to bring up ammunition and other supplies to the front line.

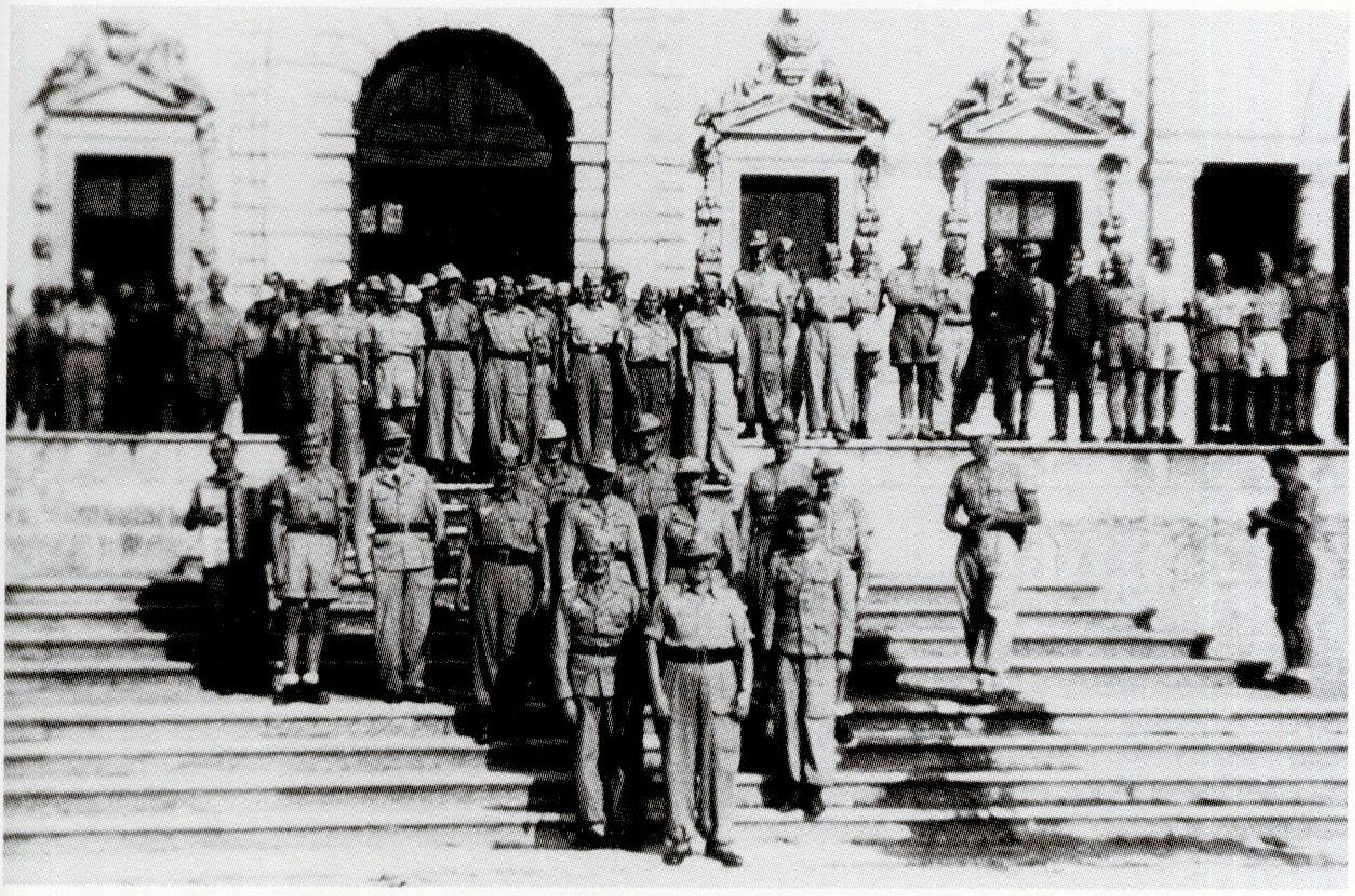
To replace the losses in the air and the more numerous ones on the ground, the pilots of II./JG 77 were continually travelling to Northern Italy in order to collect new machines, during which time they were out of action. To overcome this, the German High Command decided that the solution was to equip the *Gruppe* with some of the *Regia Aeronautica* C.205s, the best Italian fighter type seized in sufficient numbers during Operation 'Axis'. The pilots duly assembled at Lonate Pozzolo in the north where they were to convert to their new fighter, but this period was overshadowed by some fatal accidents, two pilots being killed in crashes. One of them was *Uffz.* Erhard Philipp, the promising Sudeten pilot of 6. *Staffel* who had quickly obtained six victories.

At this time, I./JG 77 was mainly employed in escorting the Fw 190 fighter-bombers of SKG 10 and, as there are no victory claims for I./JG 77 from this period, it is presumed that the pilots sought to avoid combat. Later, the *Gruppe* was supported temporarily by III./JG 77, which was also engaged in the operations to evacuate Corsica. It is known that I. *Gruppe* lost about four aircraft with one pilot killed and another wounded, but as the records are incomplete, it is possible that material losses were higher. For *Jagdgeschwader* 77, the weight of the battle therefore fell upon its III. *Gruppe* which left the Pisa area on 7 October and moved to Marcigliana in order to be closer to the front line. III./JG 77 was then very active but paid a heavy price, seven pilots being killed for only two claims. Both of these were B-17s, one of which was shot down by *Ofw.* Richard Förster of 8./JG 77, who had earlier fought in Russia, as his 17th victory, while the other was the 26th victory for *Fw.* Günther Schmitz, another successful pilot from the Eastern Front who is also reported to have been the first pilot of III./JG 77 to have carried out a frontal attack on a four-engined bomber. III./JG 77 suffered a severe blow on 13 October with the loss of *Oblt.* Helmut Hänsel, *Staffelführer* of 9. *Staffel*. A member of the *Heer* in 1938, he had been trained to fly in 1939 and joined III./JG 77 two years later. He had only seven victories to his credit but, due to his great experience, he frequently led the 8. or 9. *Staffeln* when their *Kapitäne* were wounded or on leave.

As we have seen, II. and III./JG 53 had been severely hit by bombs around 17 September and lost three pilots killed in accidents or as a result of the Allied bombing. Thus I./JG 53, flying from Marcigliana, remained the only active *Gruppe* of the *'Pik As' Geschwader* but in October claimed only three victories for the loss of three pilots.

At the beginning of October, *Obstlt.* Günther von Maltzahn, the *Kommodore* of JG 53 *'Pik As'*, caught malaria and was forced to leave the unit he had led for the past three years.The *Geschwader* was then placed under the temporary command of *Major* Kurt Ubben, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 77. The departure of von Maltzahn coincided with the arrival of other successful and experienced pilots when *Hptm.* Julius Meimberg joined the *Geschwaderstab* of JG 53 having recovered from the wounds he sustained in North Africa on 1 February 1943. At the same time, *Oblt.* Ernst-Albrecht Schulze returned to take command of 5./JG 53 after recovering from the wounds he received in Tunisia on 7 March 1943. Nevertheless, on 7 October, *Stab*/JG 53 suffered another blow when its 1a, *Major* Christoph *Prinz* von Hessen, was killed near Forli when the Fh 104 in which he was a passenger was involved in an accident. *Prinz* von Hessen had strong family associations with the Italian nobility, and as he was experienced in diplomatic etiquette, may have proved very useful in a country divided into many different factions.

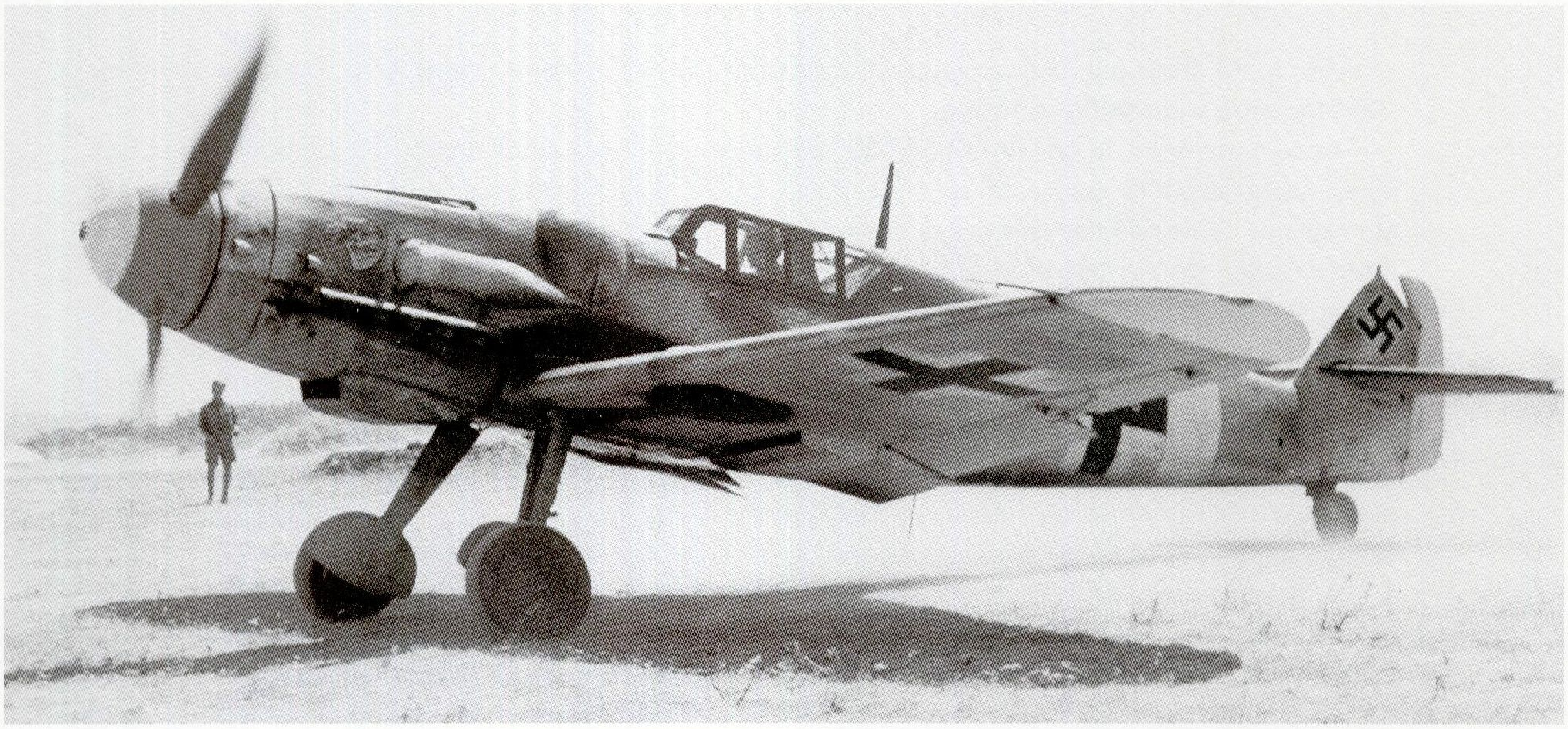
BELOW: A photograph of a ceremony held in Venice to mark the departure of Günther Frhr. von Maltzahn, the long-time Kommodore of JG 53 'Pik As'.

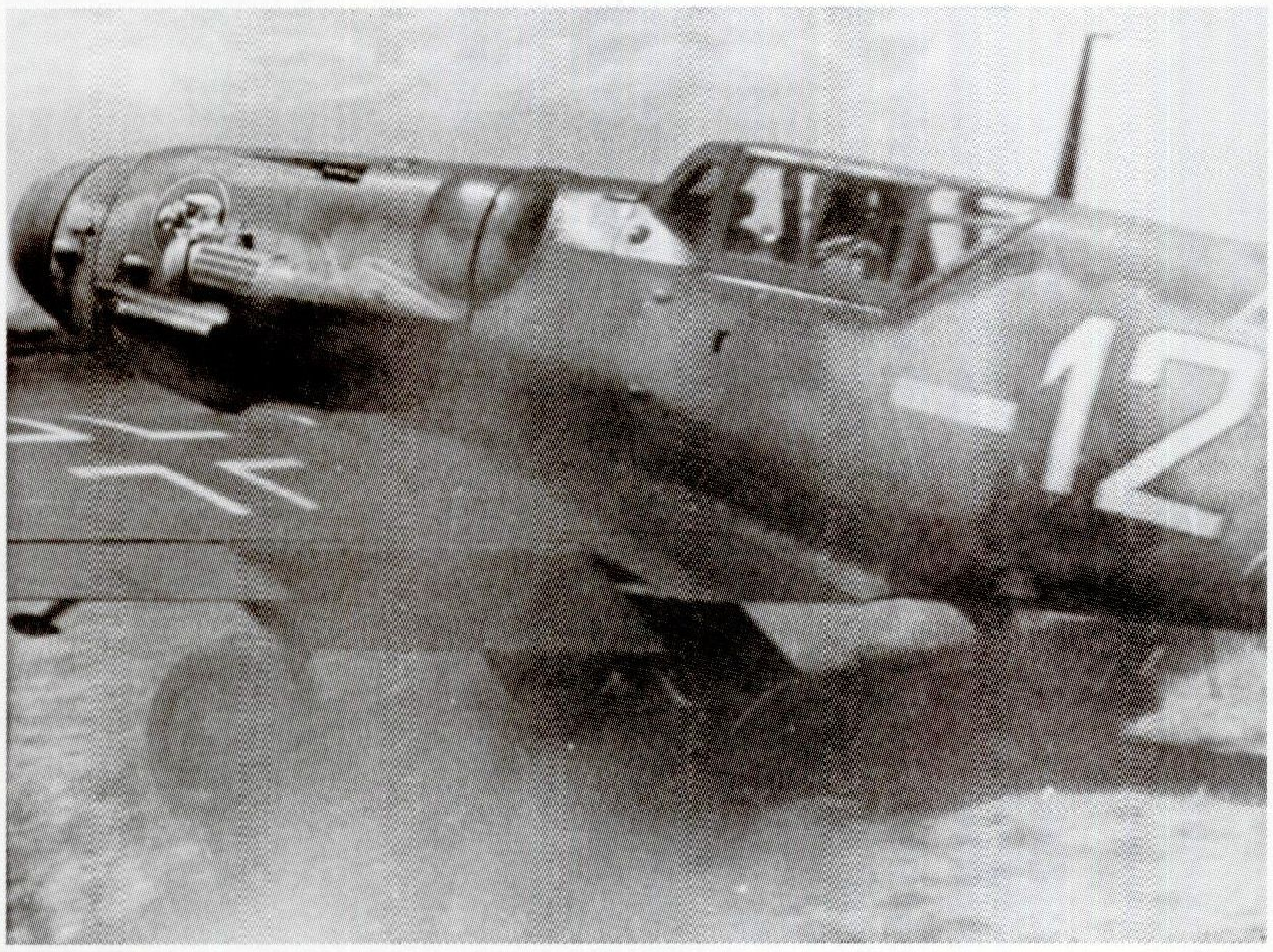


While the *Luftwaffe* in Italy was on the defensive and facing overwhelmingly strong enemy forces, the situation in the eastern Mediterranean was markedly different. On 17 September, German troops launched attacks against Cos, the only island with a small airfield. In some respects the fighting in this area was similar to Operation *'Merkur'* in May 1941, for while the *Luftwaffe* maintained aerial superiority, the Royal Navy ruled the waves. In the first phase of this new battle in the Aegean, III. and IV./JG 27 fought against the RAF's Spitfires and Beaufighters, but when the British Government called for help, the USAAF engaged its P-38s and bombers in an attempt to destroy the enemy's aircraft on their airfields on the Greek mainland, mainly around Athens. Thus, over Cos and mainland Greece, III./JG 27 lost five pilots, two of whom were killed in a bomber attack, but claimed 22 victories. *Ofw.* Fritz Gromotka of 9./JG 27 shot down five aircraft over the Aegean, bringing his total to 14, while the *Kommandeur, Major* Fritz Düllberg, was credited with three victories, bringing his tally to 21. *Ofw.* Hans Niederhöfer of 8./JG 27 increased his score to 16 victories when he destroyed two aircraft on the same day. The recently established IV./JG 27 also supported the assault on Cos, losing five men killed, including *Oblt.* Dietrich Bösler, *Kapitän* of 12./JG 27, and one taken prisoner. Fifteen *Abschüsse* were claimed, *Fw.* Heinrich Bartels of 11./JG 27 being credited with seven which brought his tally to 56, while *Oblt.* Alfred Burk, *Staffelkapitän* of 11./JG 27, shot down a Beaufighter near Scarpanto on 7 October as his 26th victory.

In the event, the German landing on Cos proved successful and deprived the Allies of an airfield in the Aegean. On 12 October, a general assault with paratroops and air landing troops permitted the capture of Leros, the "Malta of the Aegean", and the remnants of the British and Italian units operating in the eastern Mediterranean were then encircled. They assembled on the island of Samos before being evacuated to neutral Turkey.

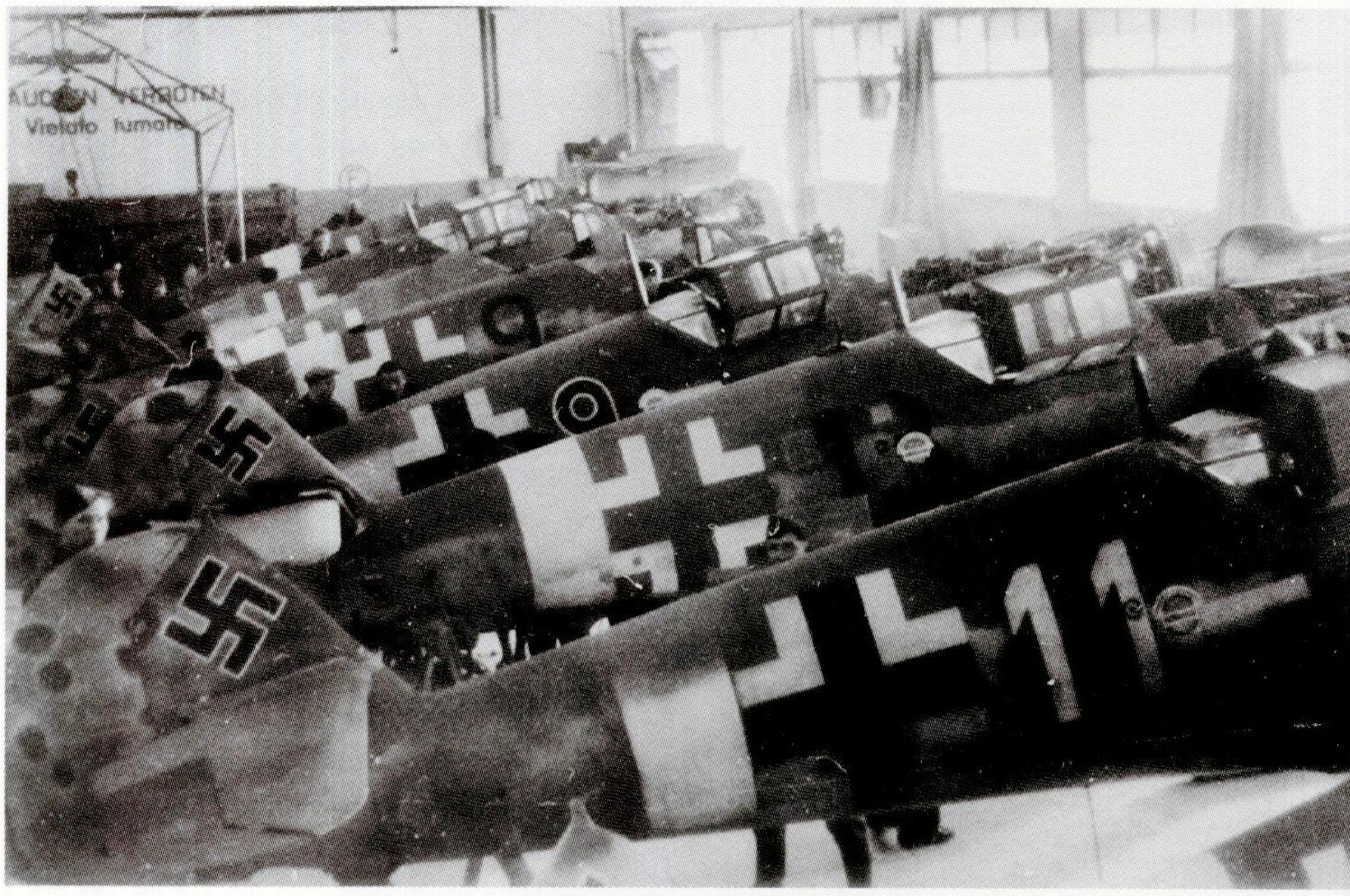
BELOW: Generaloberst Hans-Jürgen Stumpf, Luftwaffenbefehlshaber Mitte, visiting III./JG 27 at Kalamaki in late 1943 or early 1944. From the extreme left: Major Ernst Düllberg, Generaloberst Stumpf, Oblt. Kurt Hammel, Lt. Dr. Peter Werfft, Lt. Emil Clade, Lt. Hans-Gunnar Culemann and two other pilots whose names are not known.



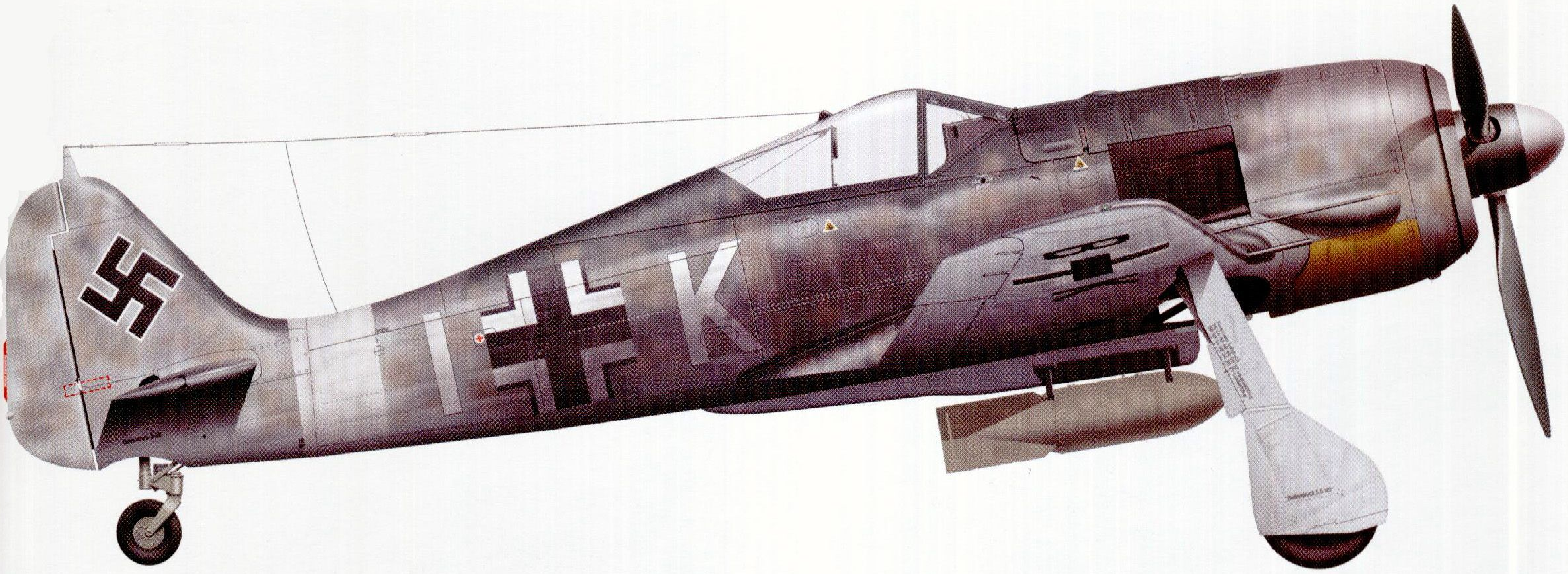


ABOVE: The photograph is thought to show Ofw. Wilhelm Mink of 5./JG 51 at Senorbi airfield, Sardinia, after a sortie in July 1943.

LEFT: The Bf 109 G-6 trop, 'White 12' is camouflaged in the standard RLM 74/75/76 day fighter scheme and is marked with the badge of JG 51 on the engine cowling. White Mediterranean theatre markings have been applied to the underside of the wingtips and around the rear fuselage, and the panel on the underside of the engine cowling is yellow. Note that whereas the fuselage numerals are edged in black, the II. Gruppe bar is not. The white tip on the green RLM 70 spinner was a feature of this Gruppe's aircraft in the summer of 1943.

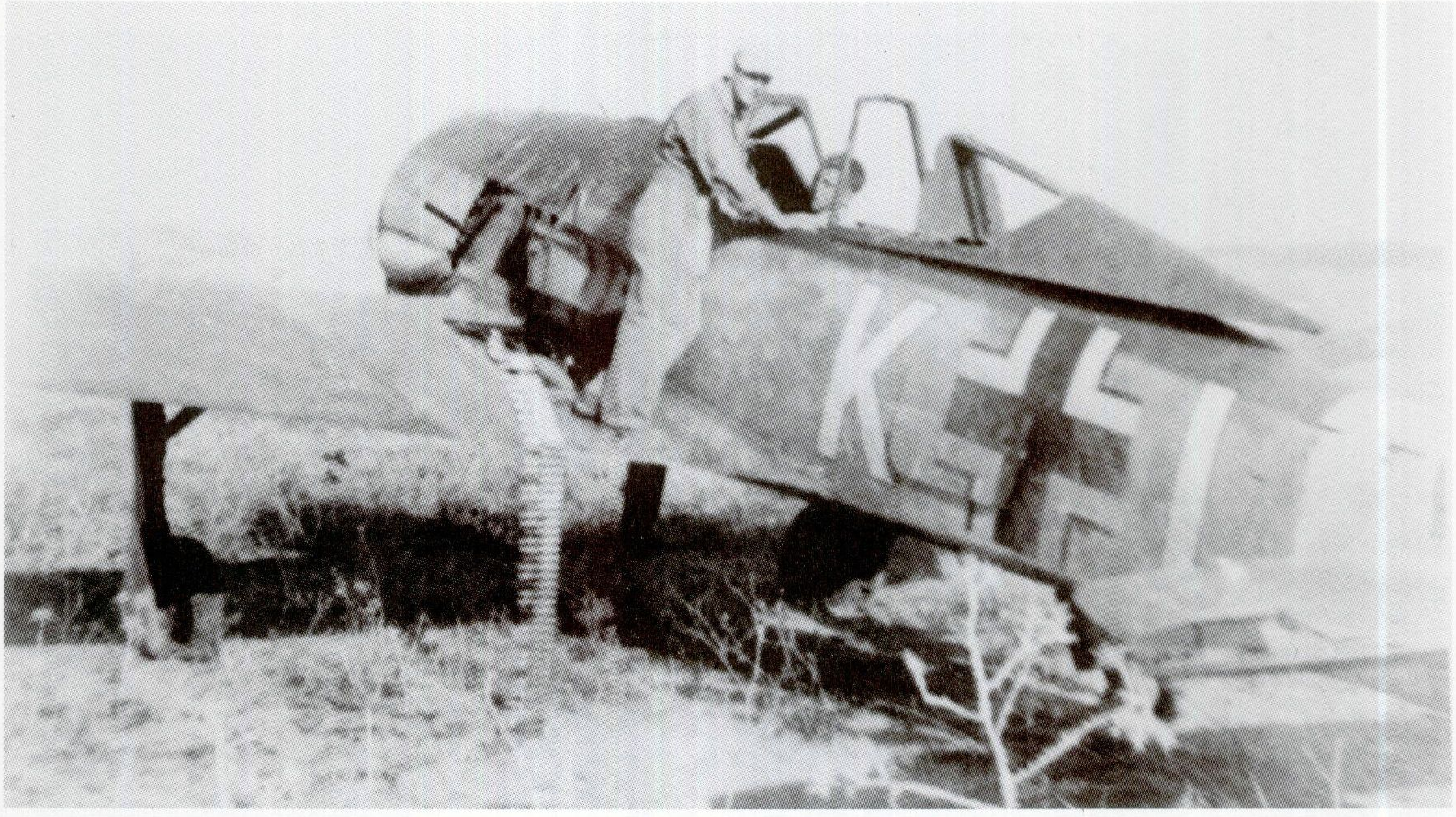


RIGHT: A repair shop in Italy in 1943. Some aircraft evidently belong to II./JG 51 and may be identified by the characteristic Gruppe symbol positioned ahead of the Balkenkreuz. Note also that the factory schemes on some aircraft have been modified, the aircraft in the foreground showing signs of being repainted, probably in a sand or medium brown. This colour has also been applied to the top of the white fuselage band, presumably to render the aircraft less conspicuous when viewed from the air. Note, too, the hard camouflage demarcation line under the cockpit of the second machine, showing where the fuselage number has been changed and the grey centre to the fuselage Balkenkreuz. The aircraft third from the camera is also of II./JG 51.

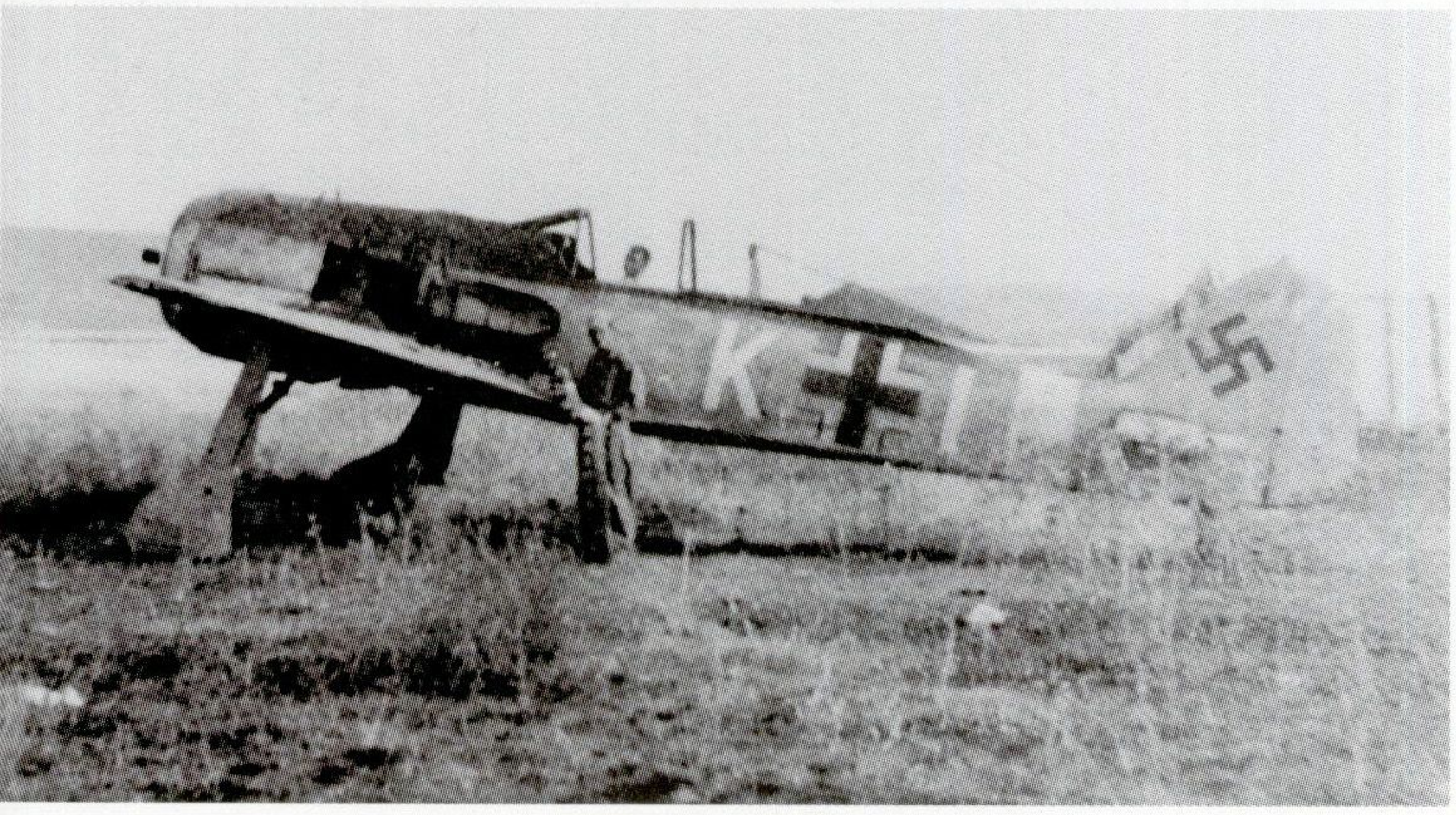


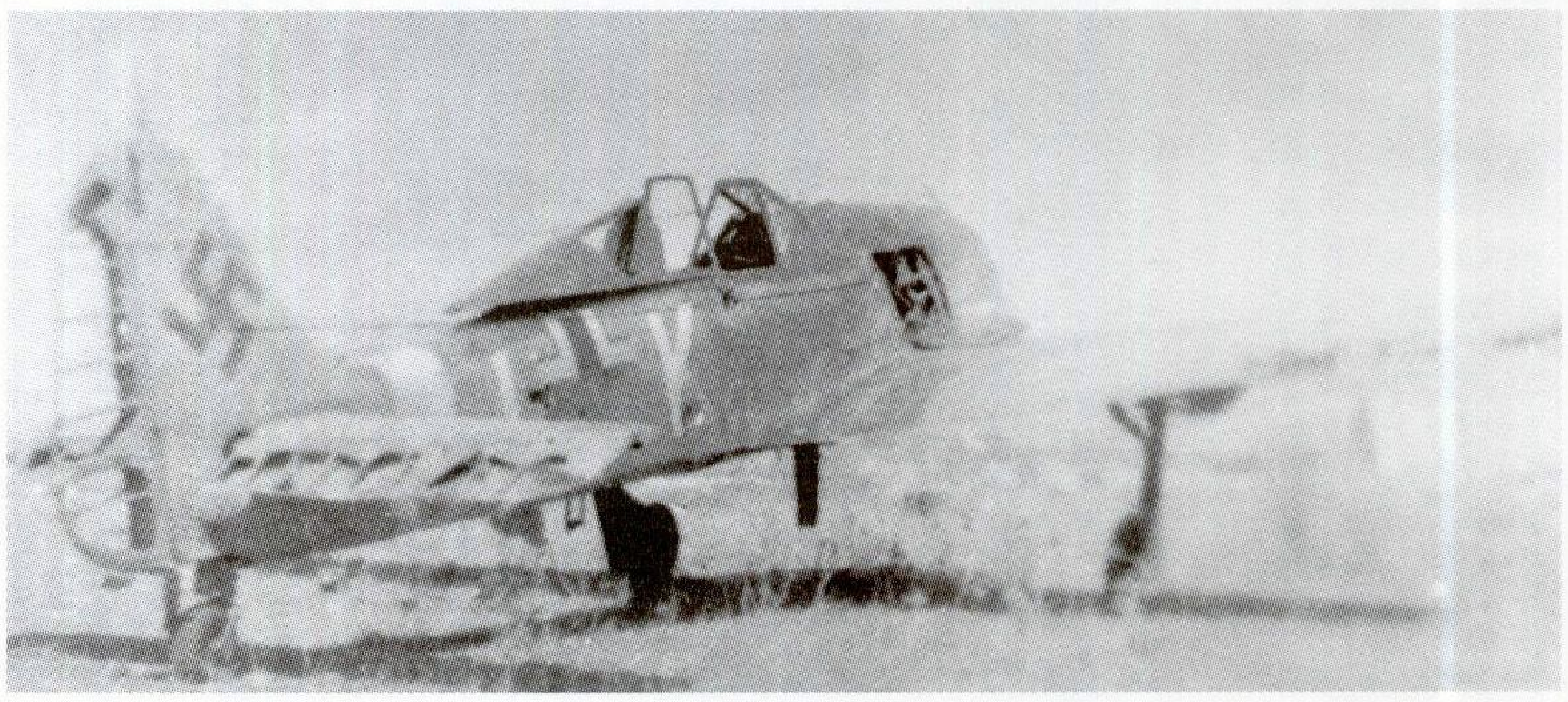
Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-5 'White K', W.Nr 1339, of 9./SKG 10, Ponte Olivio, Sicily, July 1943

The RLM 74/75/76 scheme on this aircraft had been modified with a random overspray of sand mottles, a practice which seems to have begun in 1942. Although certain details of this aircraft are not visible in the available photographs, it is thought the spinner had a white tip and that the outer wing guns were not fitted. While the aircraft had no ETC 501 bomb rack fitted when captured, one would have been mounted for operations and the machine is depicted in this configuration in the profile. The aircraft was marked with a vertical III. Gruppe bar, as used by fighter units, but had a letter and not a numeral as the tactical code. From an Intelligence report, it is known that the underwing Stammkennzeichen read R+M under the starboard wing and B+K under the port wing.

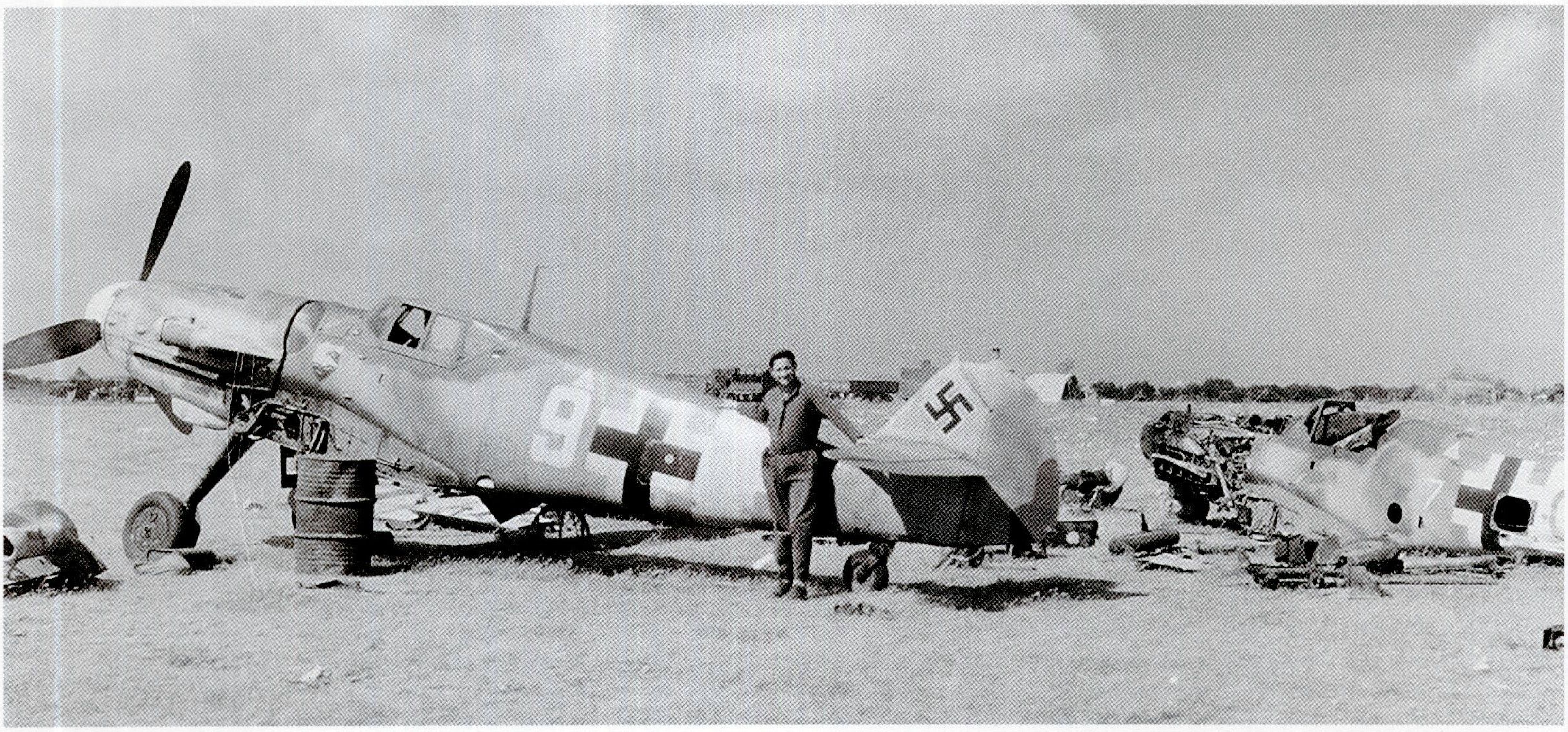


RIGHT AND BELOW LEFT: This Fw 190 A-5 'White K' was found virtually intact but looted at Ponte Olivio in Sicily in July 1943. According to RAF reports, the Werk Nummer was 1339 and the Stammkennzeichen, which was retained under the wings, was RM+BK. The uppersurface camouflage has the appearance of being oversprayed in a pattern of small, closely spaced mottles, which may have been in a sand colour to render the standard 74/75/76 finish less conspicuous against the arid Sicilian landscape. From the partial view of the inner wing (*RIGHT*), it would appear that this sand mottle also included the wing uppersurfaces.

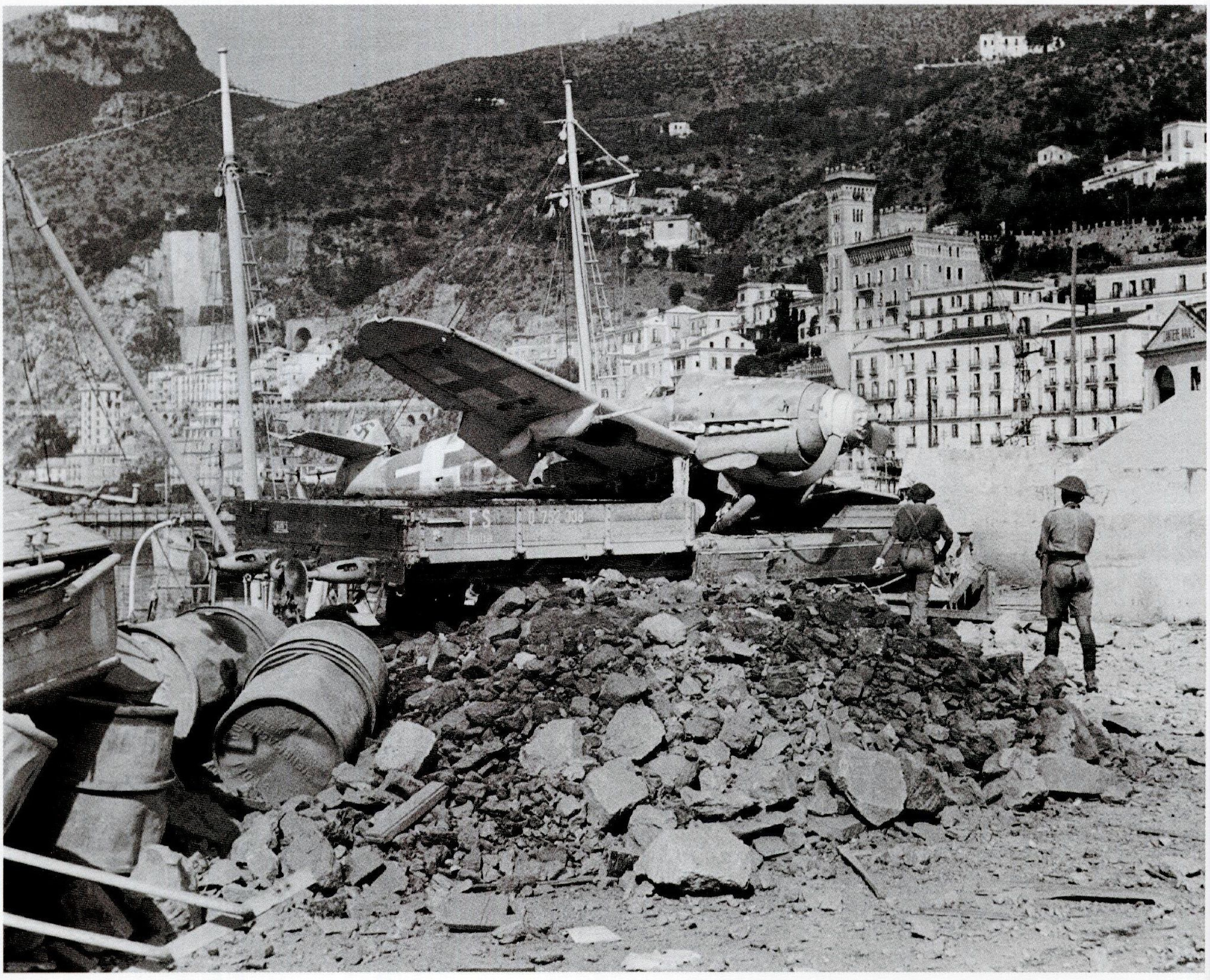




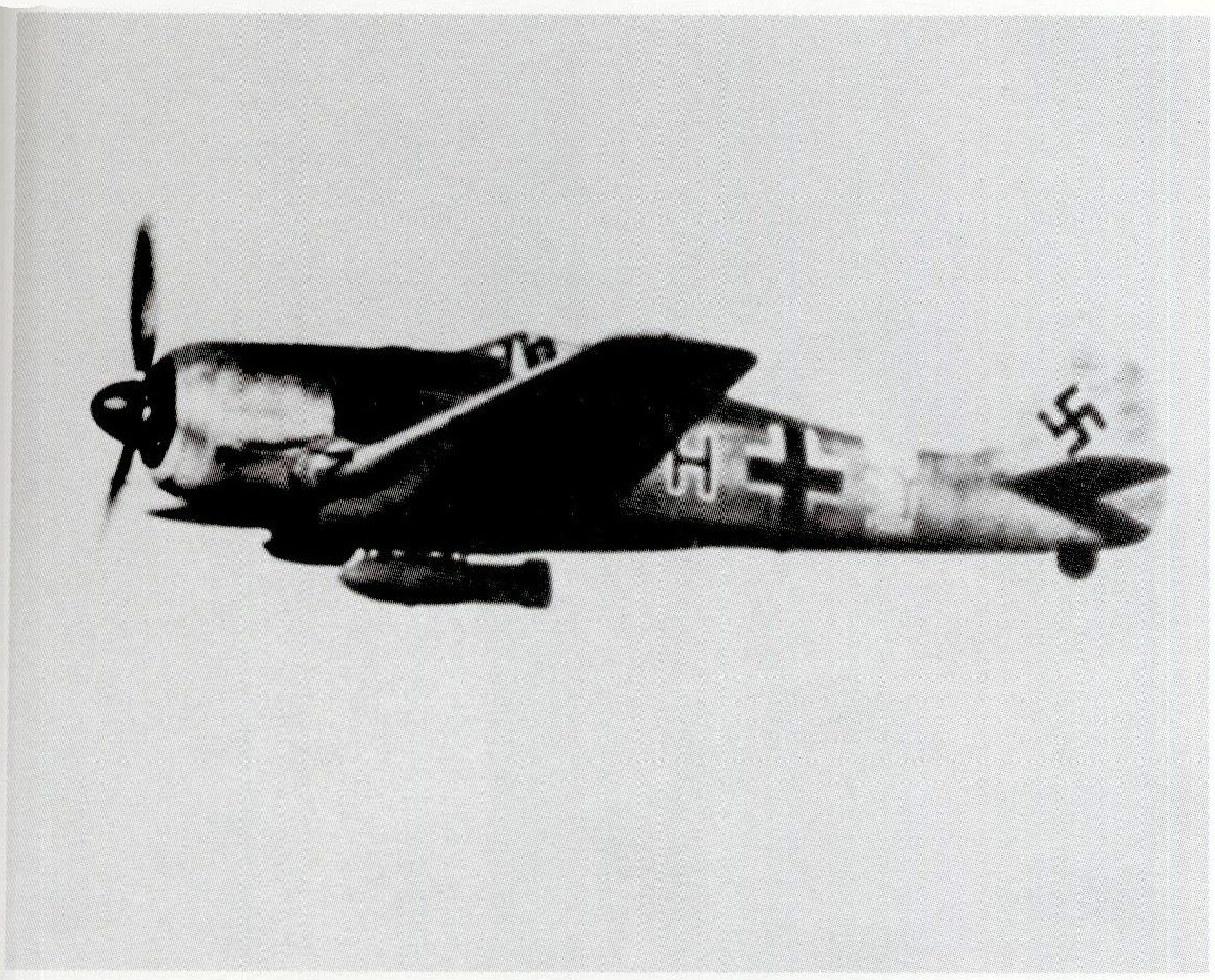
ABOVE: This view of the starboard side of the same aircraft was evidently taken later as looters have since stripped the fabric from the flying control surfaces.



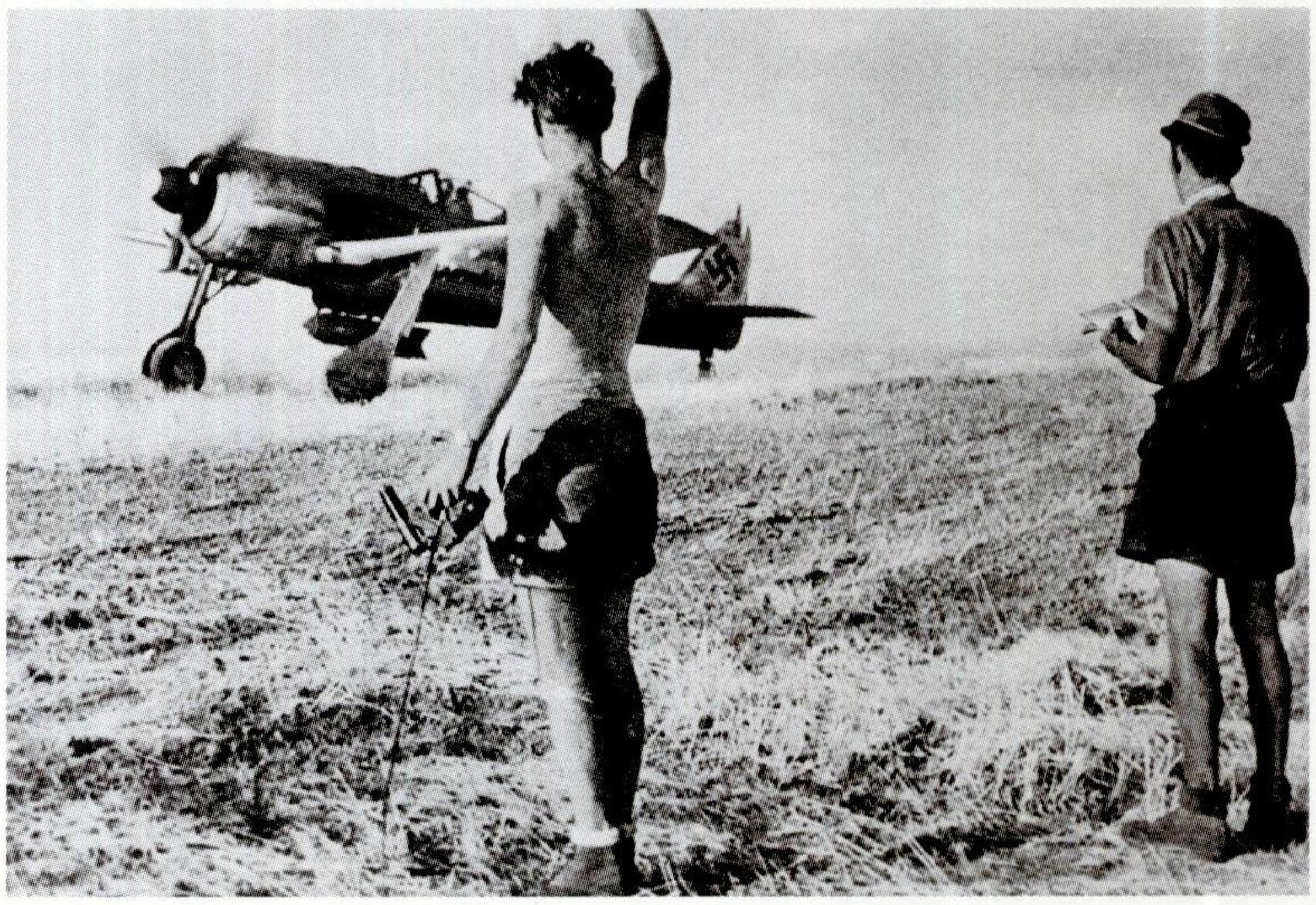
ABOVE: Two Bf 109 Gs found by US forces in Italy, both of which served with JG 77, but each displaying a different style of unit marking. On the right, with a letter 'G', probably part of the original Stammkennzeichen, showing on the white fuselage band are the remains of 'White 7' with a small numeral, whereas 'White 9' in the foreground has a more conventional sized numeral. This aircraft served with II./JG 77 and carried the Gruppe's emblem under the windscreen.



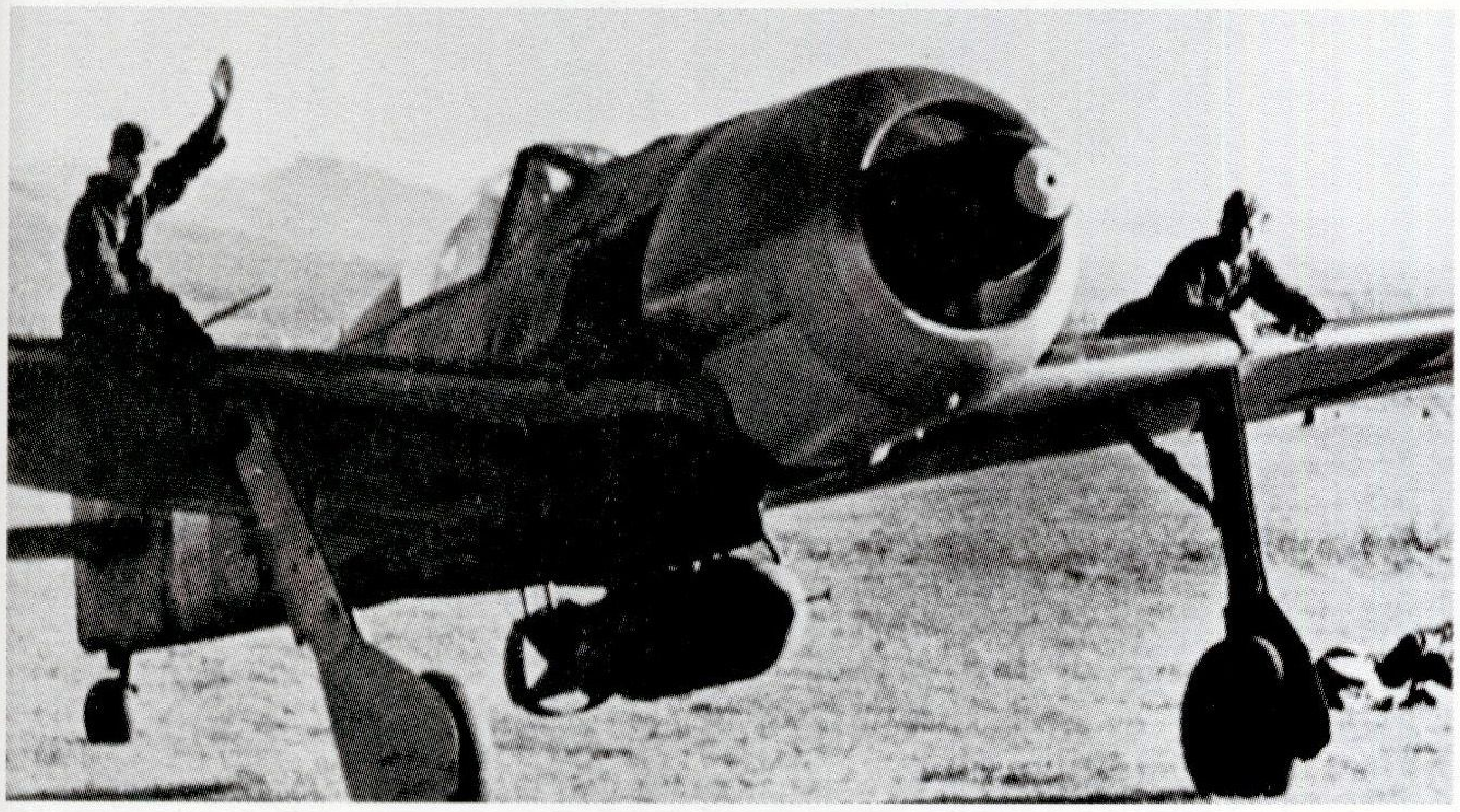
RIGHT: The remains of a Bf 109 G-6 in the dock area near Salerno. The aircraft has a horizontal Gruppe bar and may have seen service with II./JG 53. Rather mysteriously, the aircraft is on a railway wagon, but transporting it any distance by this means without dismantling it would have posed numerous problems.



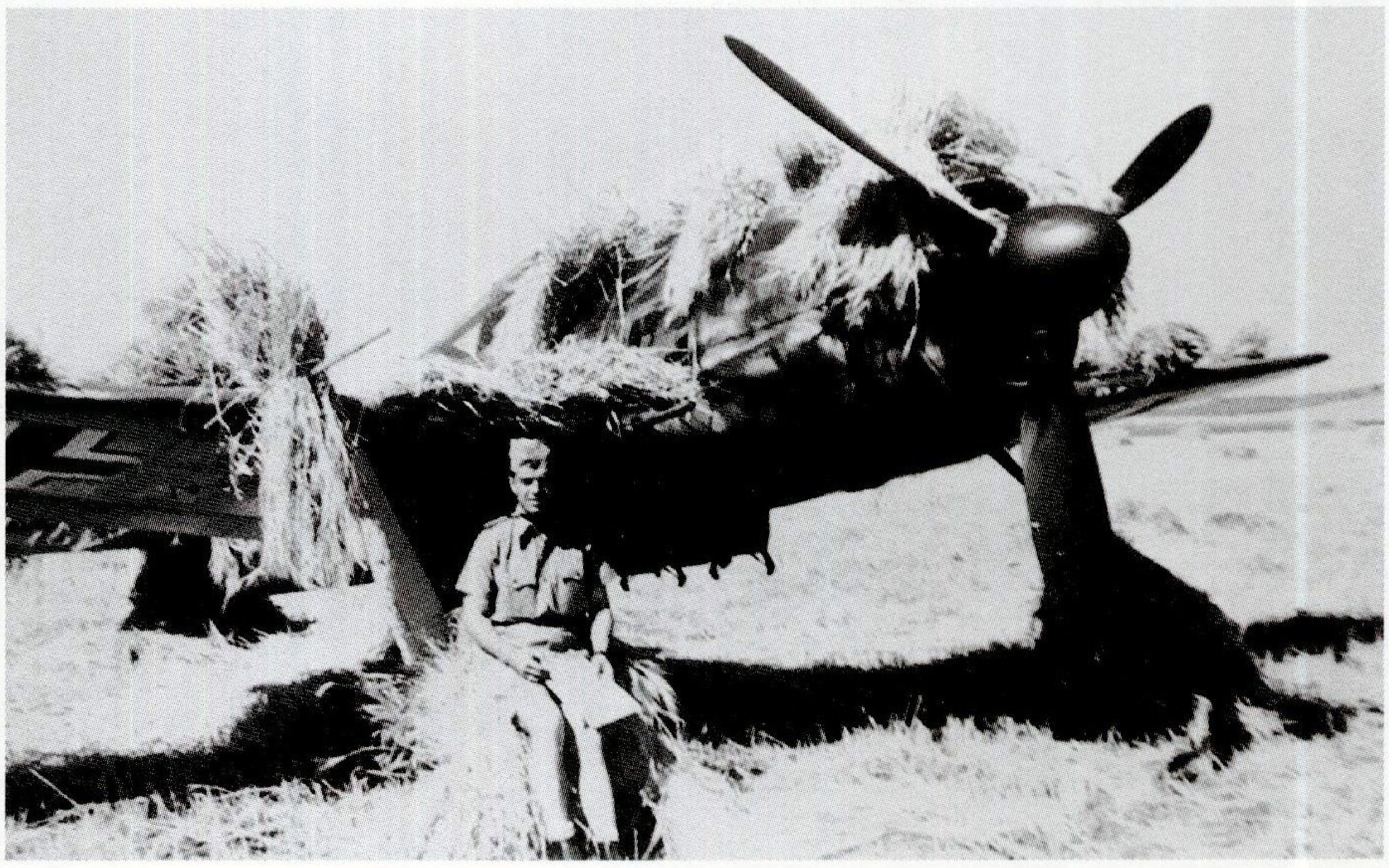
LEFT: An Fw 190 A-5, almost certainly of II. or III./SKG 10, seen shortly after taking off in the summer of 1943. This photograph has often been published after being rotated anti-clockwise to spuriously depict the aircraft in a dive, yet it is obvious that the undercarriage has not yet completed its retraction cycle as the wheels are not yet fully home in their wells. The weapon carried appears to be either an SD 250 semi-armour piercing or, more likely, a PC 250 armour piercing bomb, either of which suggests that the aircraft is setting out on an anti-shipping mission, possibly following the Allied landing at Salerno in September 1943. Faintly visible on the white fuselage band are the letters SY, the last two letters of the Stammkennzeichen.



RIGHT: An Fw 190 of II. or III./SKG 10 in Italy in September or early October 1943, shortly before these Gruppen were redesignated and formed parts of SG 4. Note that only the fuselage centreline rack carries a bomb, the two wing fairings for drop tanks being left empty as, although the extra fuel increased the aircraft's range, the tanks were generally disliked and little used because of the effect on the aircraft's speed. On one earlier occasion, when SKG 10 was ordered to mount an operation from southern Italy against targets in Tunisia, the weight of the two tanks was such that no bomb was carried and the attack was carried out using only the aircraft's cannon and machine gun armament.

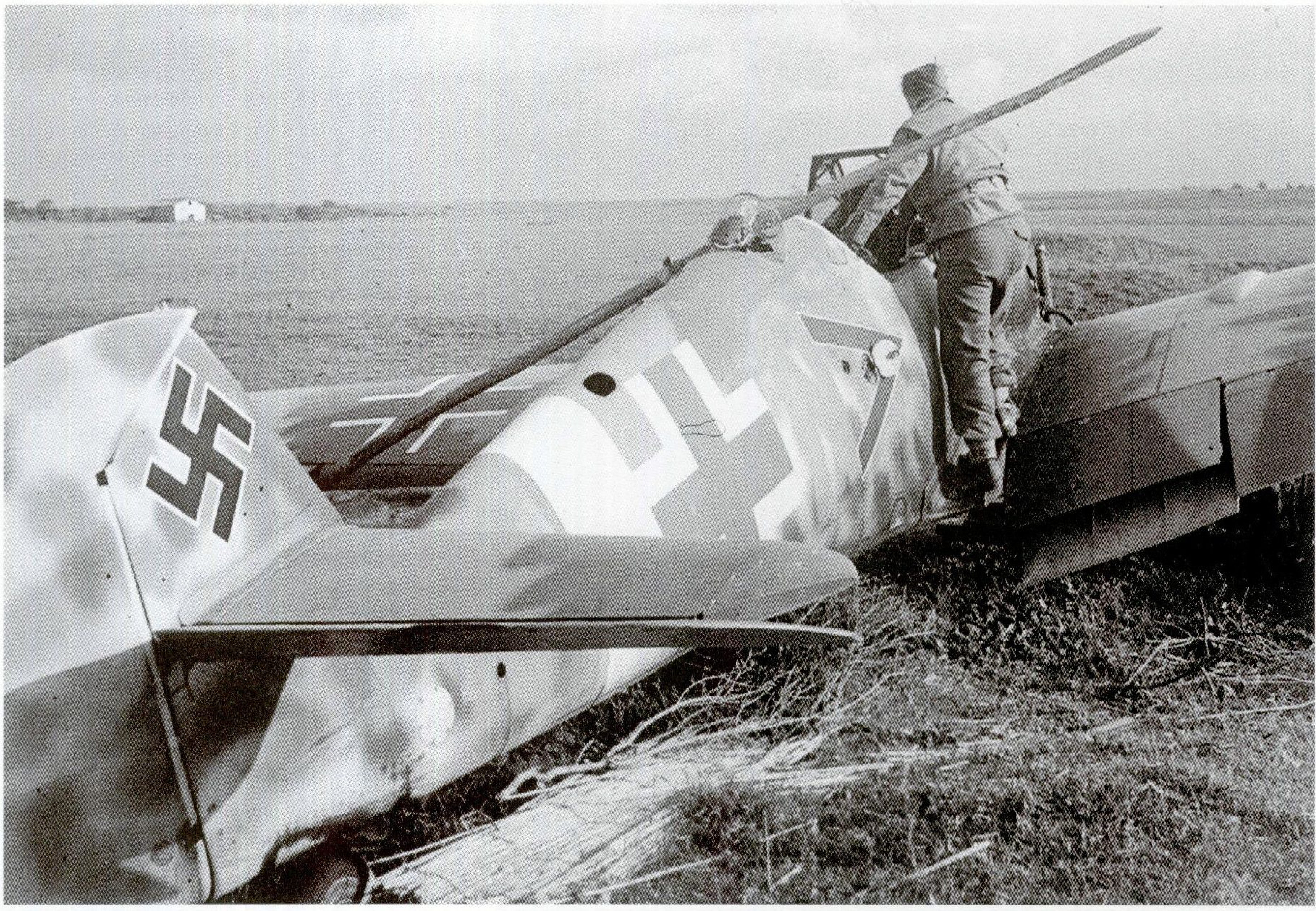


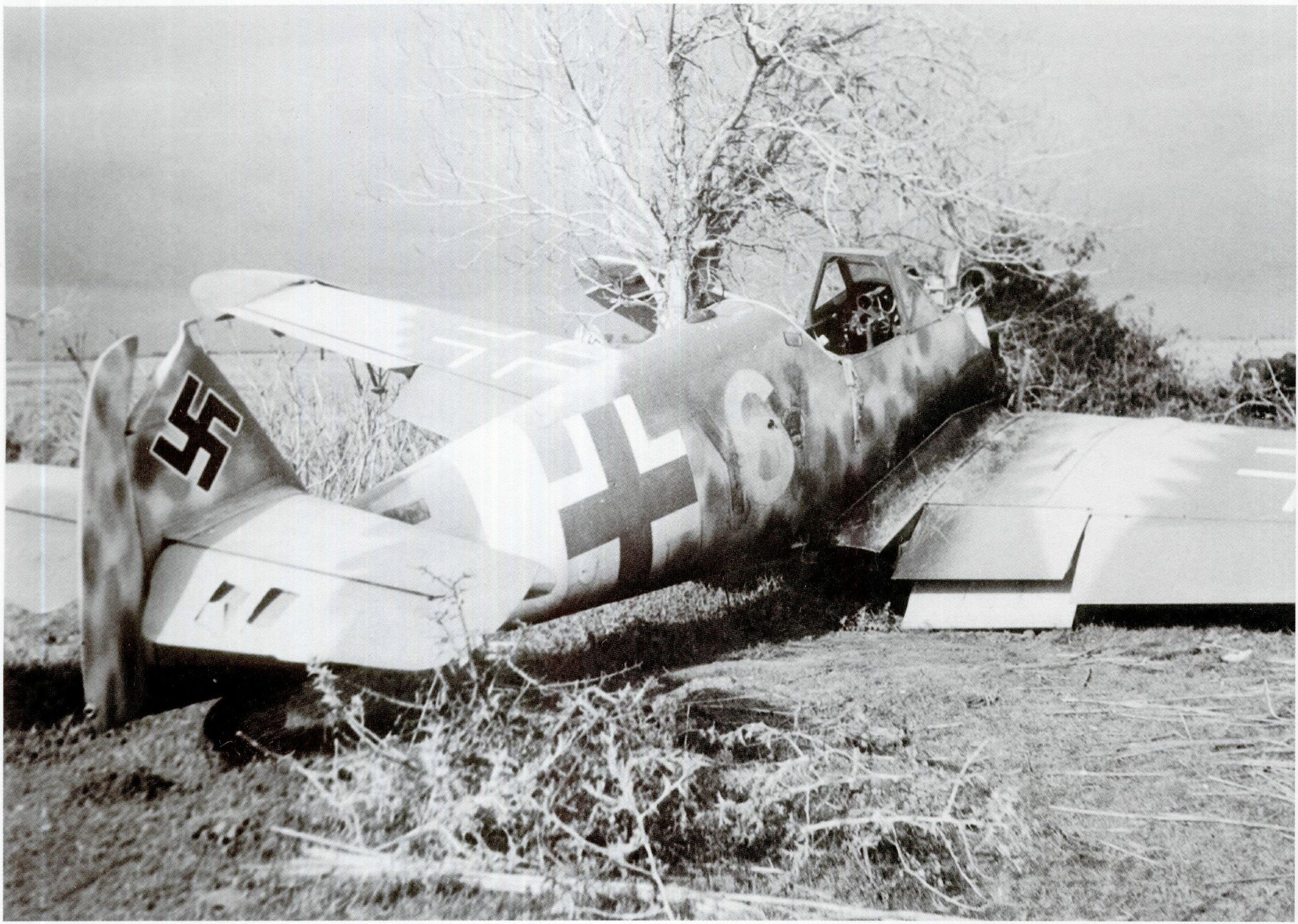
LEFT: Guided by two members of the ground staff, an Fw 190 of SKG 10 taxies to the take-off point. The rack beneath the fuselage has been loaded with an SC 500 bomb, to which has been fitted a fuse extension rod to explode the bomb above ground and optimise the blast and fragmentation effect.



RIGHT: Photographed in southern Italy, this view of the Fw 190 flown by Oblt. Fritz Holzapfel of 13./SKG 10 provides an excellent example of the precautions taken to conceal the unit's aircraft when parked in the open. Holzapfel was posted missing following an engagement with Spitfires of No. 1 Sqn. SAAF on 19 July 1943 when his Fw 190 A, W.Nr. 051, possibly the aircraft shown here, was shot down in the Gerbini-Augusta Harbour area of Sicily.

RIGHT AND BELOW: Although photographed in January 1944, these Bf 109s force-landed at the emergency landing ground at San Lorenzo in September 1943. The engines of both aircraft were then removed and, once stripped of all instruments and cockpit fittings, it seems the airframes were then left until discovered by Allied troops four months later. The aircraft pictured (*RIGHT*), W.Nr. 76520, had belonged to the Gruppenstab of I./JG 53, while 'Yellow 6', W.Nr. 210112, (*BELOW*) had flown with 3./JG 53. The camouflage on both machines is the standard 74/75/76 scheme, but the serrated demarcation between the uppersurface colours on the wing is interesting and was probably applied with the aid of masking mats. Note, however, that the flaps and radiator shutters, which would have been finished as separate components, have straight demarcation lines and were probably painted to match up with the wings after assembly. Both aircraft have D/F loop aerials fitted behind their cockpits.





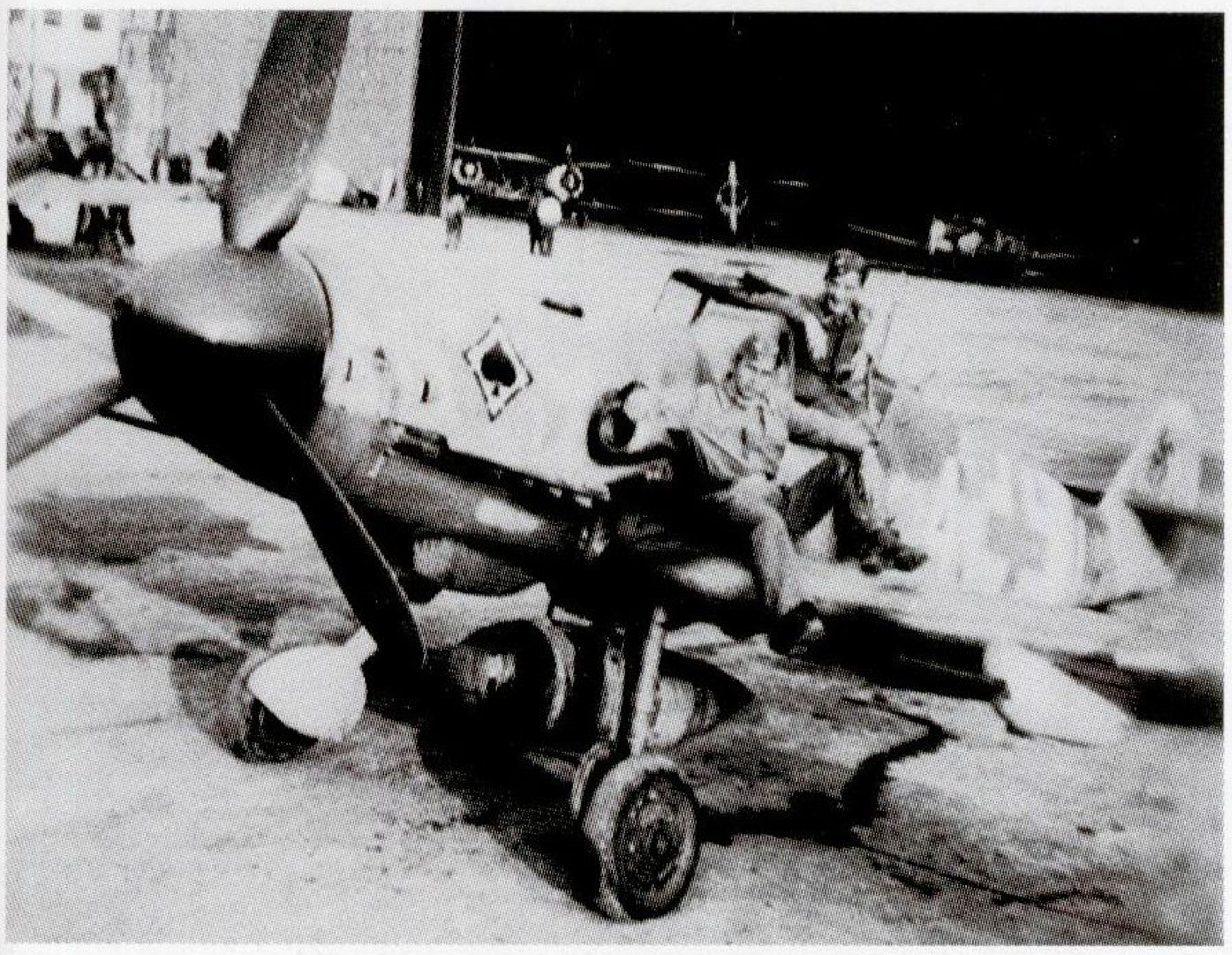
The Last Months of 1943

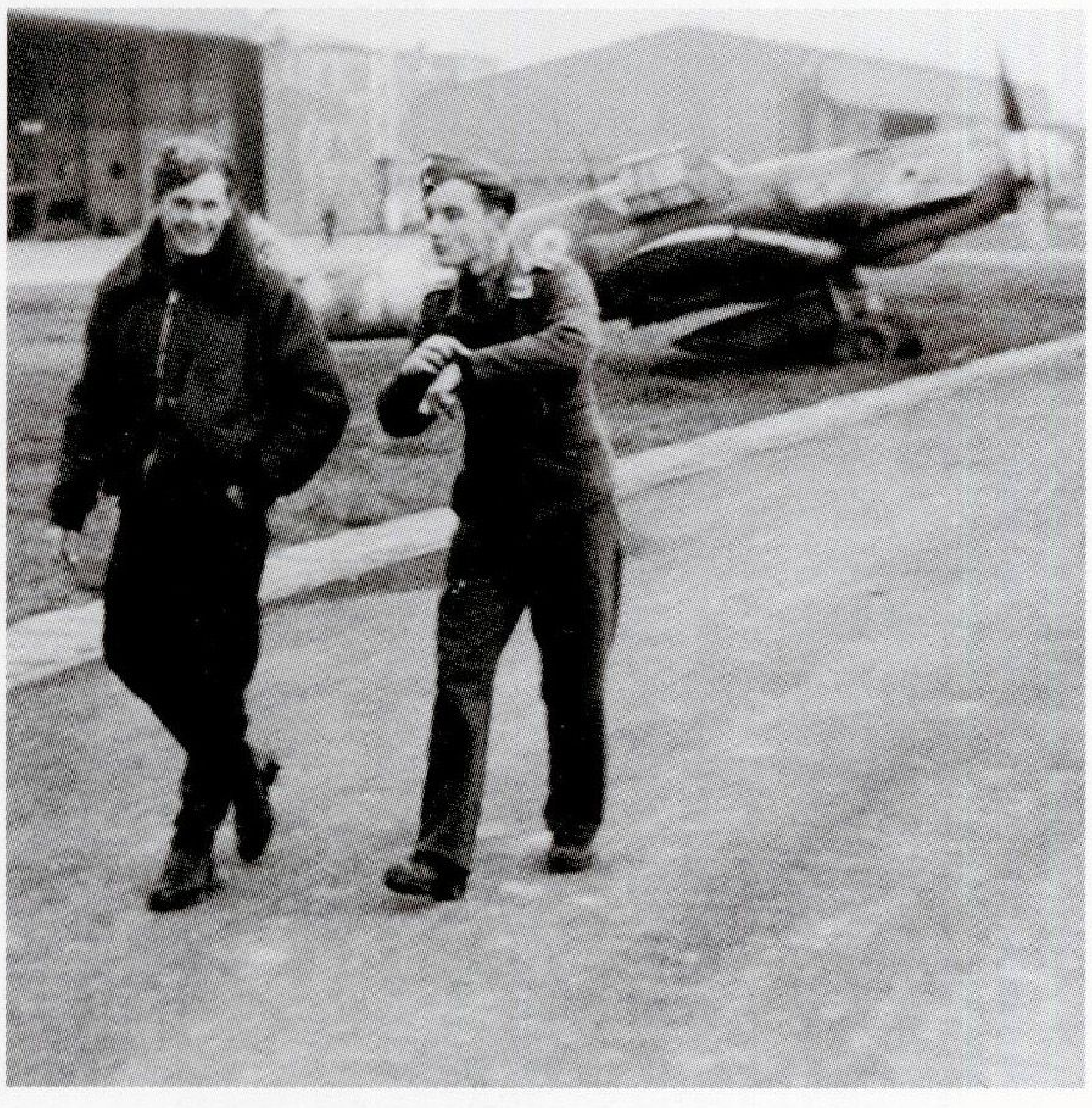
On the same day that the Allies captured Naples, 1 October 1943, USAAF bombers carried out an attack on Wiener-Neustadt, the first raid to be launched from the ex-Axis aerodromes around Foggia. By 8 October, the Volturno-Termoli line had been reached and here the Allies halted for four days before assaulting the Gustav Line. In appalling weather and difficult terrain, the Americans resumed their advance on the 12th and the British on the 22nd.

Meanwhile, on 15 October, German fighter forces in Italy were once again weakened when II./JG 53 was withdrawn from Italy and moved to Wien-Seyring where it would soon be engaged in the Defence of the *Reich*. The *Gruppe's* redundant Bf 109s were handed over to I./JG 53 at Marcigliana and, with so few fighters remaining in Italy, Kesselring could no longer afford to spread them far and wide where their effectiveness was dissipated, and concentrated them instead on specific tasks. I./JG 53 and I./JG 77 were therefore assigned to the support of 10. *Armee* and to escorting ground-attack Fw 190s, while the Macchi C.205s of II./JG 77 were ordered to defend the Turin area. The task of III./JG 53, the s*chwere Gruppe*, equipped with Bf 109 Gs armed with 20mm cannon under the wings and based at Reggio-Emilia, was to protect the important industries of Northern Italy. No tasks were assigned to III./JG 77 as this *Gruppe* would also soon be relieved and transferred to Mizil in Rumania. There, it was to replace I./JG 4 which, it will be remembered, had first seen action against US B-24s over the Ploesti oil installations on 1 August, and was in turn due to move to Italy to replace the relieved III./JG 77.

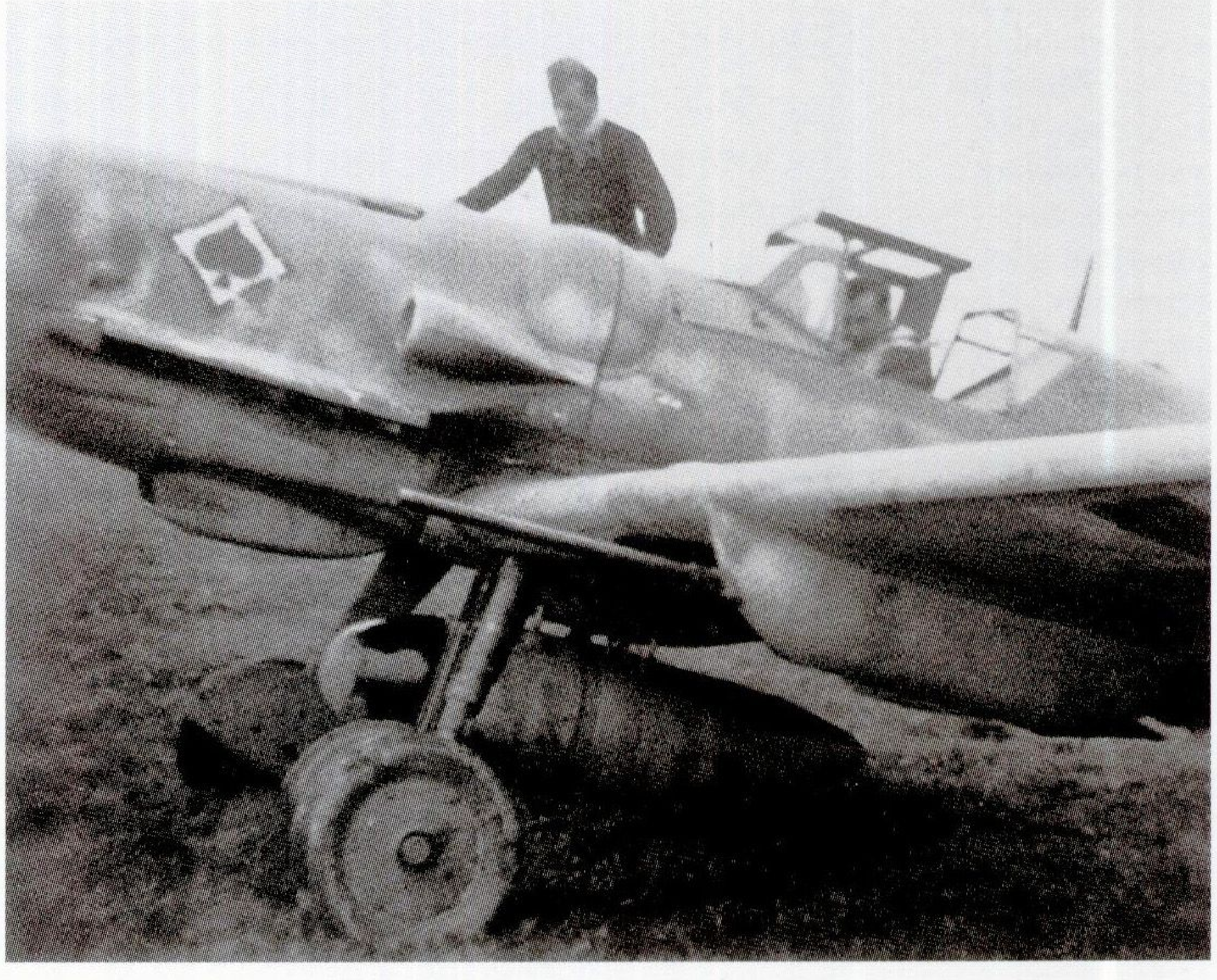
The second half of October remained relatively quiet in Italy, JG 53 and JG 77 claiming only four or five victories, and although seven pilots were lost, most of these were due to accidents. In the eastern Mediterranean, after the defeat of the British and Italian troops in the Dodecanese, IV./JG 27 moved to Podgorica in Yugoslavia on the 28th, leaving the defence of the area to III./JG 27 in Greece. For the German fighters of III./JG 27 operating over the Aegean, their main opponents were the RAF aircraft harassing German naval communications between the islands, and the *Gruppe* accounted for six such aircraft in the last two weeks of October. In the same period, IV./JG 27 operated mainly against the RAF and USAAF which were indirectly supporting partisan forces by attacking local defences in Yugoslavia and Albania, and claimed 16 victories, most of them P-38s. The IV. *Gruppe*, now led by *Hptm*. Joachim Kirschner, a *Ritterkreuzträger* and former *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 3 credited with about 175 victories, suffered a severe setback on 31 October. On that date, *Fw*. Heinrich Bartels claimed his 62nd and 63rd victories but *Oblt*. Alfred Burk, *Staffelkapitän* of 11./JG 27, was killed over Albania during an engagement with P-38s. Burk, who had been credited with his 28th victory six days previously, had had a long career, having flown with JG 2 in 1940, then with 8./JG 52, and had been transferred to the Mediterranean when IV./JG 27 was formed. He was replaced as *Staffelkapitän* by *Lt*. Wolfgang Hohls.

BELOW: 'White 4' was flown by Fw. Franz. Leuffen of 7./JG 53, the pilot sitting on the wing, and was photographed at Reggio-Emilia in October 1943. Note again the oil leaking onto the auxiliary fuel tank and the Italian aircraft in the background which had been appropriated from their original owners in September. 'White 4' clearly had a yellow panel under the nose and the spinner appears to have been finished in a gloss RLM 70 green.

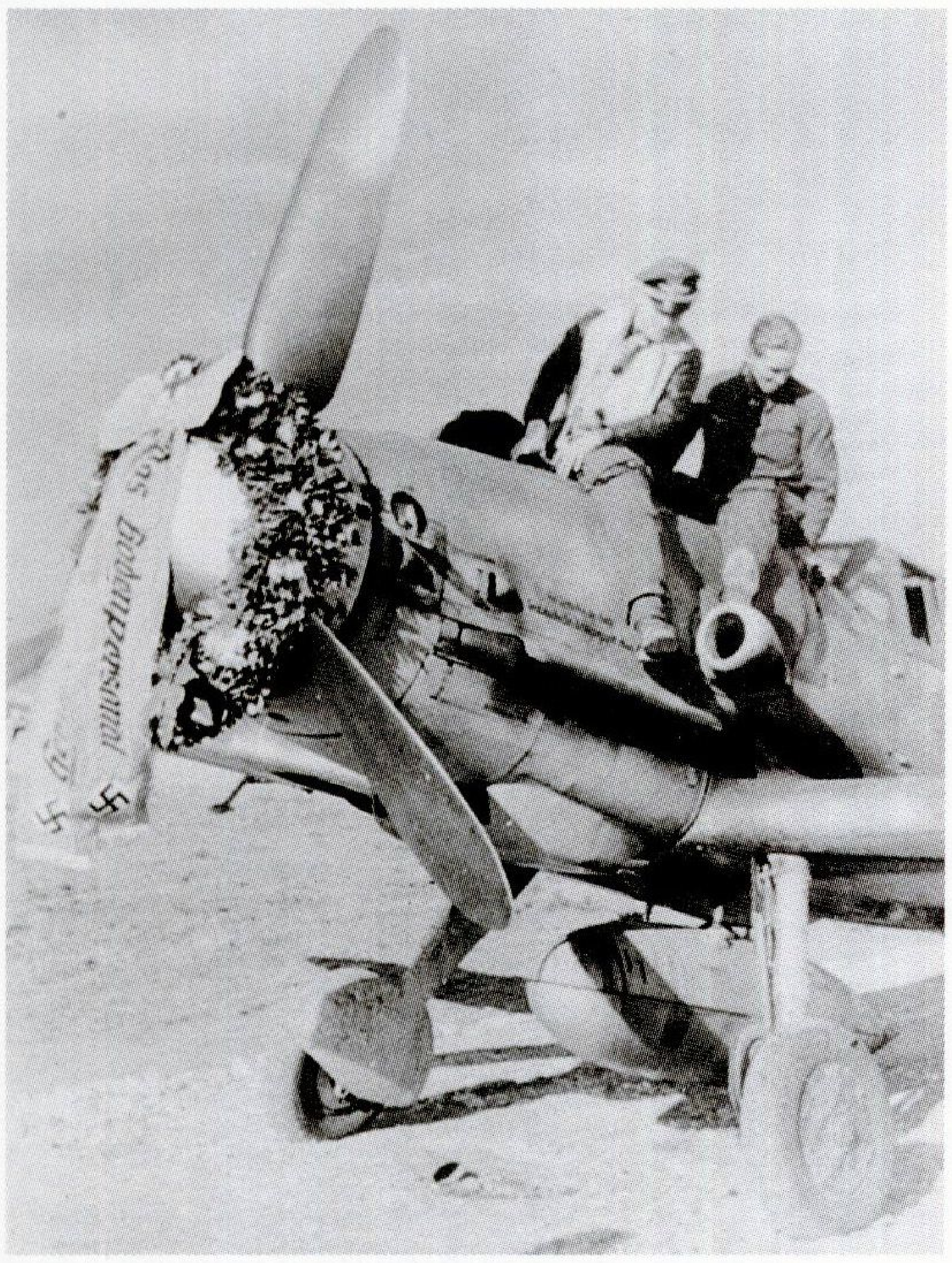


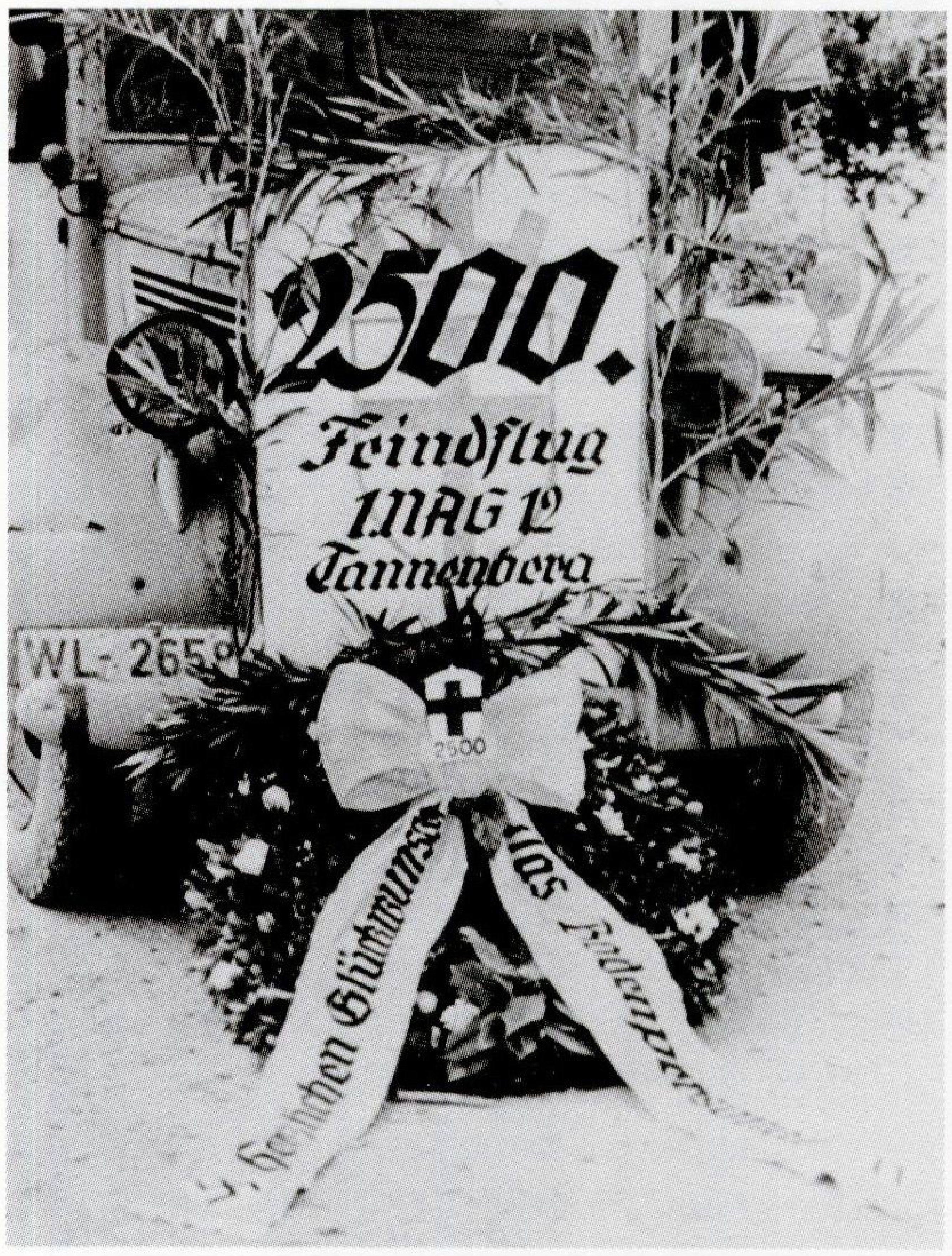


RIGHT: 'White 8', another Bf 109 G of 7. Staffel at Reggio-Emilia, showing JG 53's 'Pik As' badge and a spiral spinner. On the left, wearing the flying jacket, is Lt. Horst Wegener of 7./JG 53 who was killed during an air battle with Spitfires over Viterbo on 30 May 1944 while flying a Bf 109 G-6 coded 'White 3'



BELOW: Lt. Günther Seeger of 7./JG 53, seen here in his Bf 109 G-6 at Reggio in October 1943, was one of the III. Gruppe's most successful pilots. He claimed his first victories while flying with I./JG 2 during the western campaign of May and June 1940 and remained with that Gruppe until, in 1942, he transferred to Oblt. Meimberg's 11./JG 2. He was then in action in Tunisia and, when this Staffel was disbanded, he joined III./JG 53 and remained in the Mediterranean theatre until mid-February 1944 when he was transferred to 4./JG 53 operating on Reichsverteidigung duties. At the time he left III./JG 53, Seeger had been credited with 46 victories and, a month later, he claimed two more victories and received the Knight's Cross. He survived the war with 56 Luftsiege, all of them aircraft of the Western Allies. Note the oil streak on the fuel tank under the fuselage.





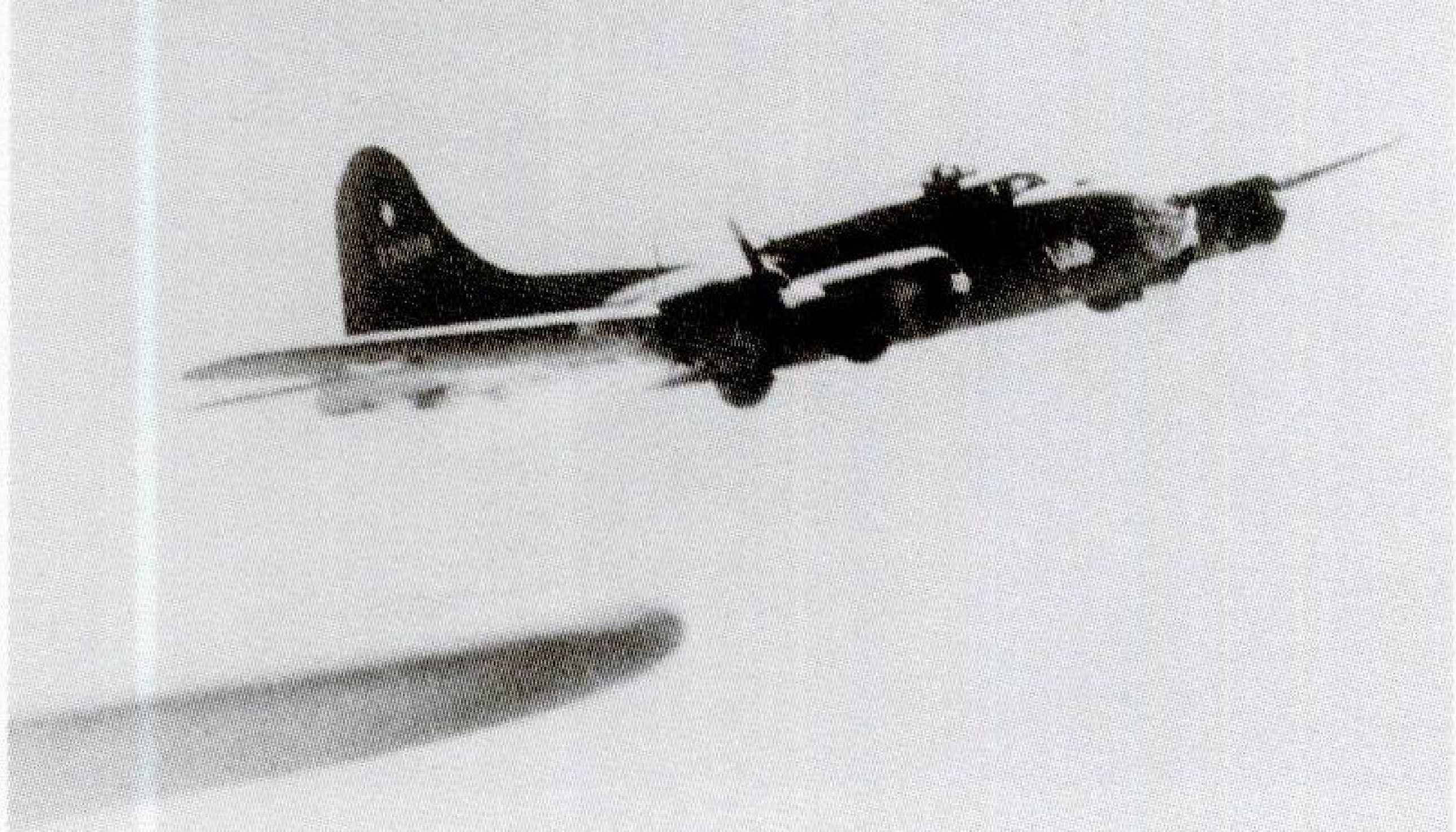
FAR LEFT AND LEFT: The two Staffeln of NAG 12, based mainly in Albania, flew reconnaissance missions over the coast of Albania and south-eastern Italy where there were such important harbours as Bari, Tarento and Barletta. These photographs record the 2,500th war flight by 1./NAG12 and were taken at Berat in Albania. Although the date of this event is not known, the pilot who flew this sortie was Lt. Günther Troebs, seen seated with a mechanic on the engine cowling of his Bf 109 G-8 (*FAR LEFT*). Note the auxiliary fuel tank, obligatory for long range missions, and the unit badge. The latter was inherited from the disbanded Aufklärungsgruppe 10 'Tannenberg', from which NAG 12 had been formed.

In November, as the USAAF launched an aerial offensive against the industrial areas of Northern Italy, the Germans continued to slow the Allied advance on the ground with skilful delaying actions. The Allied advance therefore only made slow progress but by the 15th, the US Fifth Army's British X Corps had advanced to the Gustav Line running along the Garigliano river while, on the other side of Italy, separated by the central mountains, Eighth Army tried to cross the Sangro. However, the Allied advances were hindered by the mountainous terrain and bad weather and, taking advantage of this delay, Kesselring used the time to complete the defences of the Gustav Line.

Meanwhile, on the 9th, JG 53 had finally received its new *Kommodore* when *Major* Helmut Bennemann arrived to take command following the departure of von Maltzahn at the beginning of October. This *Geschwader*, now reduced to just the I. and III. *Gruppen*, claimed only six victories in the whole of November, with I. *Gruppe* being the most active, but total casualties were five pilots killed and three others wounded. Similarly, I./JG 77, ordered to Rome on 2 November where it was closer to the front lines, was the only active *Gruppe* of JG 77. This *Gruppe* claimed ten *Abschüsse*, the most successful pilot being *Ofw.* Herbert Kaiser who claimed three victories that included two B-17s shot down on 27 November, increasing his victory tally to 60. Seven pilots, however, were lost, mostly inexperienced youngsters who had only recently completed their flying training. At the end of November, the *Kommandeur* of I./JG 77, *Hptm.* Burckhardt, left the *Gruppe* and, for a time, was an instructor in EJG *Süd* in Southern France. His successor, *Hptm.* Theo Lindemann, did not arrive until January.

Still operating C.205s, II./JG 77 transferred to Airasca and then Lagnasco. The *Gruppe* suffered no losses as the pilots had finally become accustomed to flying their new fighter, and *Oblt.* Hrdlicka, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 77, claimed a P-38 on 9 November. While this in itself is hardly remarkable, it is mentioned as it was probably the first of only two victories achieved by German pilots while flying the C.205, for two days later a new pilot, *Uffz.* Albert Ullrich, was credited with a B-24, the first of his future 12 victories but the only one he shot down while flying the Italian machine.

BELOW: 'Vicky', a B-17F of the US Fifteenth Air Force, had released her bombs over the railway marshalling yards at Foggia in Italy when she was hit in her starboard fuel tank by anti-aircraft fire. Pictured here with the No. 4 engine feathered and on fire, the aircraft dropped out of formation and crashed. According to the diary kept by the Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 77, a captured B-17 pilot said that US aircrew preferred to ditch into the sea rather than bale out over German-held territory in Italy as they had been briefed to expect summary execution. Even when taken to hospital, this American pilot repeatedly asked when he was going to be shot.



In the Balkans, III./JG 27 was now operating from Kalamaki and Tanagra, patrolling over the Aegean to protect the shipping supplying the islands and to defend the airfields which were sometimes bombed by the USAAF, RAF and SAAF. Particularly active in the anti-shipping role were the Beaufighters of the RAF and SAAF, and the *Gruppe* claimed 13 of these aircraft as well as a Baltimore, a B-25 and a B-26 in November for the loss of just one pilot killed. Pilots from IV./JG 27, operating from Mostar and Podgorica in Yugoslavia as well as over Greece, claimed 30 victories in November, most of these occurring on the 15th and 17th when they tried to intercept formations of B-25s, escorted by P-38s, which were attempting to bomb airfields on the mainland. The highest scoring pilots were *Fw.* Heinrich Bartels of 11./JG 27, who shot down ten aircraft, which brought his total to 70 victories, while his *Kommandeur*, *Hptm* Joachim Kirschner, was credited with nine victories. The value of these achievements is questionable, however, for both Bartels and Kirschner claimed just two B-25s apiece and the destruction of fighter aircraft, which could inflict only minor damage on ground targets, hardly mattered if the bombers were allowed to complete their task.

Also in November there was an increase in activity in Southern France, where the situation had been relatively quiet for some time, and a few victories were claimed by the *Einsatzstaffeln* of the training unit JGr. *Süd.* Within this unit its individual *Staffeln* were traditionally considered to be associated with specific *Jagdgeschwadern*, so that 1. *Staffel* was considered to correspond to EJG 77, the training unit for JG 77. Similarly, 2. *Staffel* corresponded to EJG 27, 3. *Staffel* to EJG 53 and 4./JGr. *Süd* to EJG 2. There was a sound reason for this as the conditions facing the operational *Geschwadern* varied according to the theatre of operations to which they would be assigned and the particular type of opposition they would face there, and it was therefore considered prudent to adapt the training accordingly. During the month, these units shot down two P-38s and three B-17s, one of the latter being claimed by *Oblt.* Ernst-Georg Altnorthoff, a pilot who had previously flown with IV./JG 27. Soon afterwards, on 2 December, the discredited *Major* Heinz Bär, now leading JGr. *Süd,* shot down a P-38 and a B-17 near Ste. Marie de la Mer in the French Camargue.

In Italy, Fifth Army began an attack against the western end of the Gustav Line on 20 November, but although some progress was made, it was at enormous cost and in December, snow and near-arctic weather made conditions even more difficult. The two *Gruppen* of JG 53 remained on the defensive, claiming 24 *Luftsiege* in December but losing seven pilots. The pilots of I./JG 53 flew mainly over the front line where *Ofw.* Hans Kornatz of 2./JG 53 shot down four artillery spotting aircraft, bringing his total to 31 victories. Another successful pilot was *Ofw.* Seidl of 8./JG 53 who shot down three P-38s on 1 December, later adding a fourth victory to bring his total to 25. *Fw.* Müller of 7./JG 53 was also credited with three P-38s and a B-24, bringing his tally to seven confirmed claims. On 11 December, *Major* Jürgen Harder, who had left the *'Pik As' Geschwader* when the *Führer* banned him from further flying, was awarded the *Ritterkreuz.* Naturally, Harder wanted the award ceremony to be held at the base of his old III./JG 53, then at Reggio-Emilia, and so took the first step in returning to his old frontline unit.

The two *Gruppen* of JG 77 were less active. Although I./JG 77 claimed 13 victories in November, patrols by the C.205s of II. *Gruppe* resulted in no significant encounters with the enemy. On 1 December, the *Kommodore*, Johannes Steinhoff, took off and climbed to 9,500 metres to intercept a Mosquito reconnaissance aircraft, possibly of the SAAF, and shot it down as his 165th victory and, on the 5th, various pilots claimed artillery spotting aircraft shot down. At the end of December, the experiment with the captured C.205s came to an end when it was decided that these aircraft were insufficiently robust, underarmed, and spun too easily when the speed dropped off during tight turns. Other criticisms concerned the Italian radios, which were considered poor, and that the rearming and refuelling arrangements were awkward and precluded rapid operational turnround times. II./JG 77 was

RIGHT: The Italian Macchi C.205, powered by a Daimler-Benz DB 605 engine, first appeared in 1943, and by the time of the armistice on 8 September 1943, 177 examples had been delivered to the Regia Aeronautica. Surviving machines were seized by the Germans during Operation 'Achse' and eventually issued to II./JG 77. This arrangement, however, was not a success and only two victories were claimed by the Gruppe's pilots while equipped with the type. One victory was credited to the experienced veteran Oblt. Franz Hrdlicka, Kapitän of the 5. Staffel, shown with one of the unit's Macchi C.205s.

BELOW: The only other Luftwaffe pilot to claim a victory while flying the C.205 was Uffz. Albert Ullrich of 6./JG 77.

RIGHT: Pilots of II./JG 77 lined up in front of one of the Gruppe's C.205s.

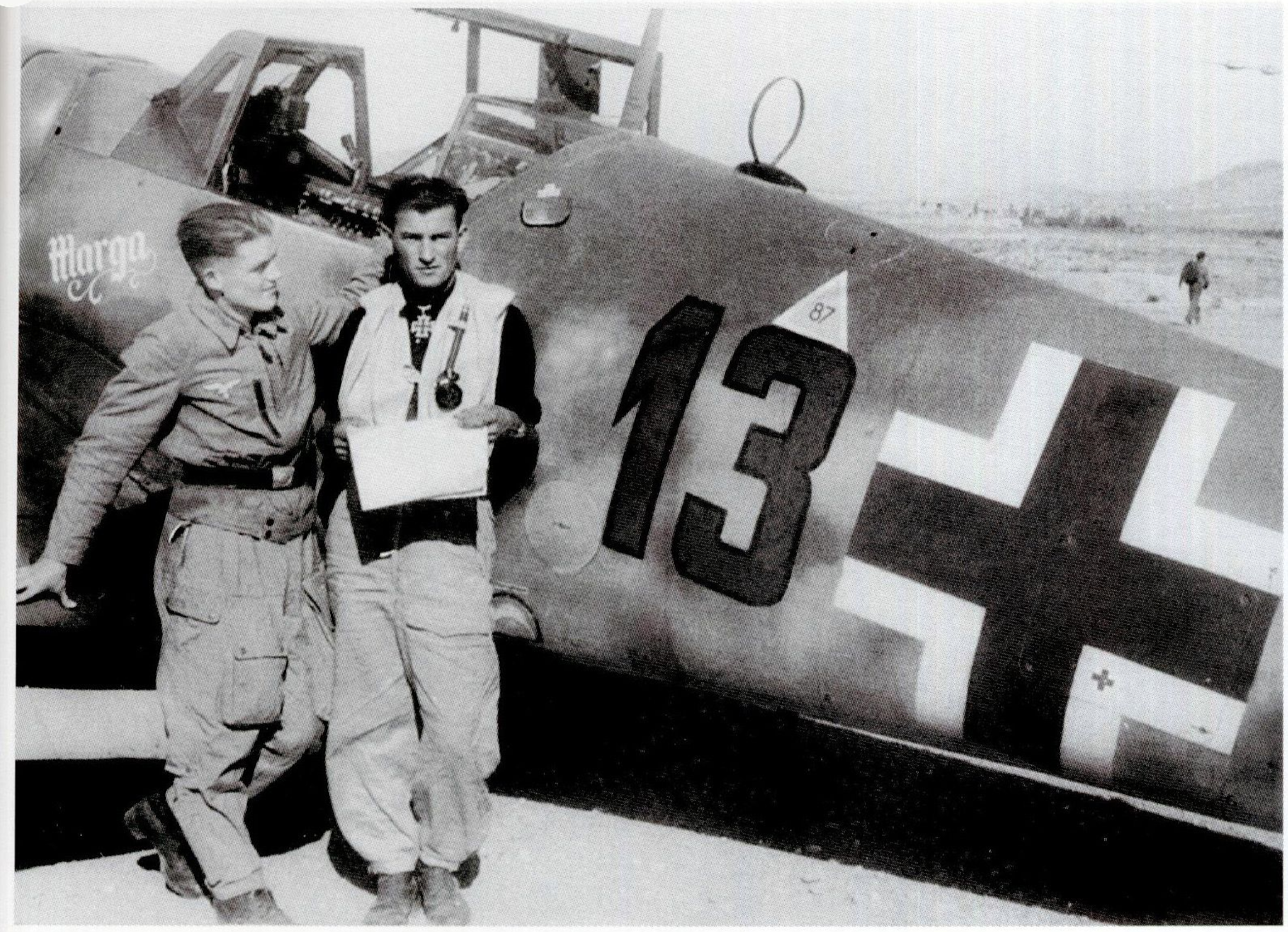
therefore ordered to re-equip with Bf 109 G-6s and the C.205s were passed on to I° *Gruppo Caccia*, the first flying unit of the new *Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana*, or ANR, the Italian Republican Air Force of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, or RSI.

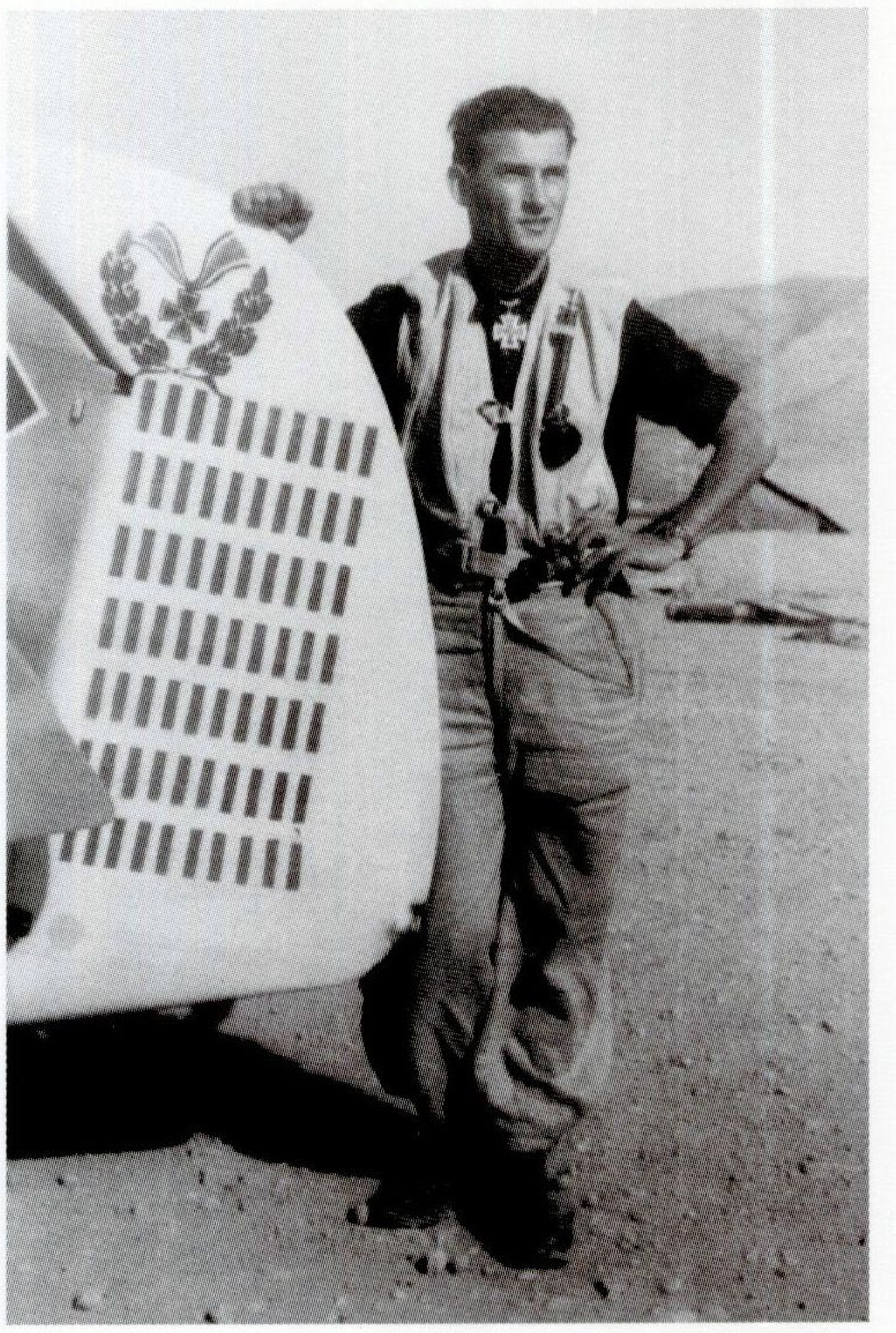
A welcome event for the German fighter force in Italy was the arrival of two *Gruppen* as reinforcements. II./JG 51, which had left Sicily at the time of Operation 'Husky', returned after resting and refitting in Germany and after having fought in the *Reichsverteidigung* from around mid-August to December. Based at Neubiberg, near Munich, the *Gruppe* had been visited in October by Galland and Göring and had been subjected to a forceful and persuasive address by the former who urged them to do their best in the fight for the *Vaterland*, etc. On 19 December, the *Gruppe*, probably already based at Udine, engaged in its first combat over the Alps during which it lost three aircraft but claimed one B-24 and one B-17 destroyed. On 25 December, II./JG 51 shot down four aircraft over Italy, these being credited to *Hptm*. Karl Rammelt, the *Kommandeur*, who claimed one, *Hptm*. Herbert Puschmann, who also claimed one, and *Lt*. Otto Schulz who claimed two.

The other *Gruppe* to arrive in Italy was I./JG 4. When III./JG 77 moved to Rumania in October, the intention had been to replace it in Italy with I./JG 4, but this unit had taken so long to move southwards from Mizil that it did not arrive at its destination, Lavariano, until some weeks later. Nevertheless, on 28 December, *Obstlt*. Günther *Freiherr* von Maltzahn, who had returned to Italy as *Jagdfliegerführer Oberitalien*, could at last assemble three fighter *Gruppen*; III./JG 53, II./JG 51 and now also I./JG 4 under *Hptm*. Franz 'Gockl' Hahn. This concentration of forces proved successful as, on that day, a formation of unescorted B-24s flew to bomb marshalling yards in the Vicenza area, III./JG 53 claiming seven Liberators, II./JG 51 claiming at least four, possibly six, and I./JG 4 three. In fact, the USAAF lost 11 Liberators, and although only three German pilots were wounded, one was the Technical Officer of I./JG 4, *Lt*. Werner Gerhartz, and another the *Kommandeur* of II./JG 51, Karl Rammelt, who had to leave the unit temporarily to recover. On 30 December, two P-38s were claimed by II./JG 51 near Rome when the *Gruppe* was sent closer to the front line in central Italy to support the *Heer* in its defensive positions.

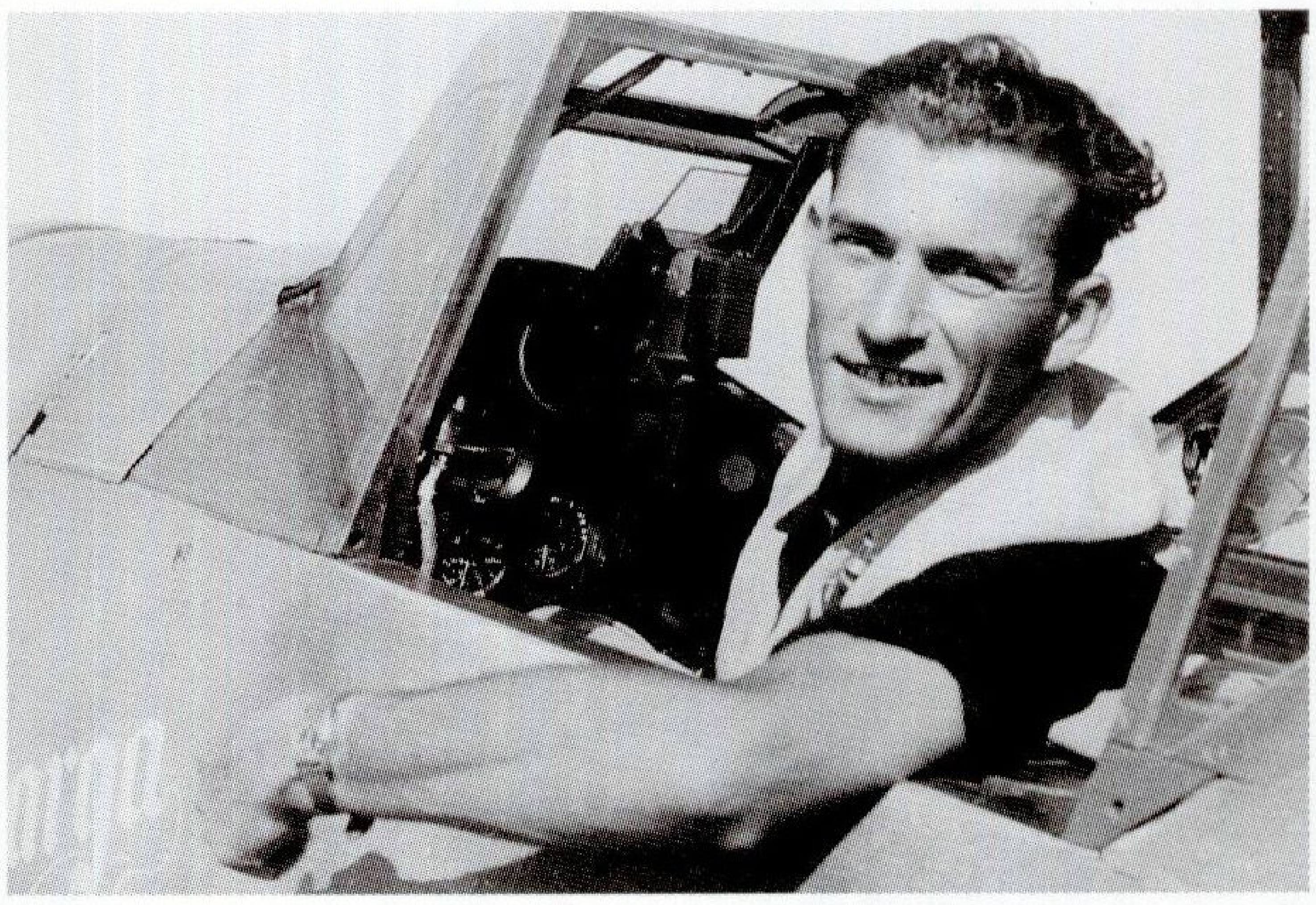
In Greece, III./JG 27 continued to operate mainly against the USAAF bomber forces which, accompanied by a heavy fighter escort, arrived to bomb airfields on the mainland. The *Gruppe* claimed 16 victories in December but three of its pilots were killed in action. That month too, *Lt*. Emil Clade, a well-known veteran of JG 27 and *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 27, left the *Geschwader* to act as an instructor with 2./JGr. *Süd*, handing over command of his *Staffel* to *Lt*. Hans-Gunnar Culemann.

In the northern Balkans, IV./JG 27 continued to oppose the aircraft of the RAF and USAAF but had 11 of its pilots killed in December including, on the 10th, *Lt*. Wolfgang Hohls, *Staffelkapitän* of 11./JG 27 and Burk's successor. The new *Staffelführer* was *Lt*. Rolf Heisner who only survived for a week, for on the 17th he was flying as wingman to the *Kommandeur*, *Hptm*. Joachim Kirschner, when they were surprised east of Metkovic by Spitfires which shot down the two Bf 109s. Heisner attempted a belly-landing but crashed and was killed, while *Hptm*. Kirschner baled out but had the misfortune to land in an area held by Tito's Communist partisans or, as the German High Command preferred to call it, *Bandengebiet* – bandit territory. The partisan war in Yugoslavia was a particularly cruel one and once in their hands Kirschner was soon murdered, a sad and ignominious end for this gallant 23-year-old Saxon pilot who had flown in combat since 1941, had been credited with 188 victories and decorated with the Oak Leaves.



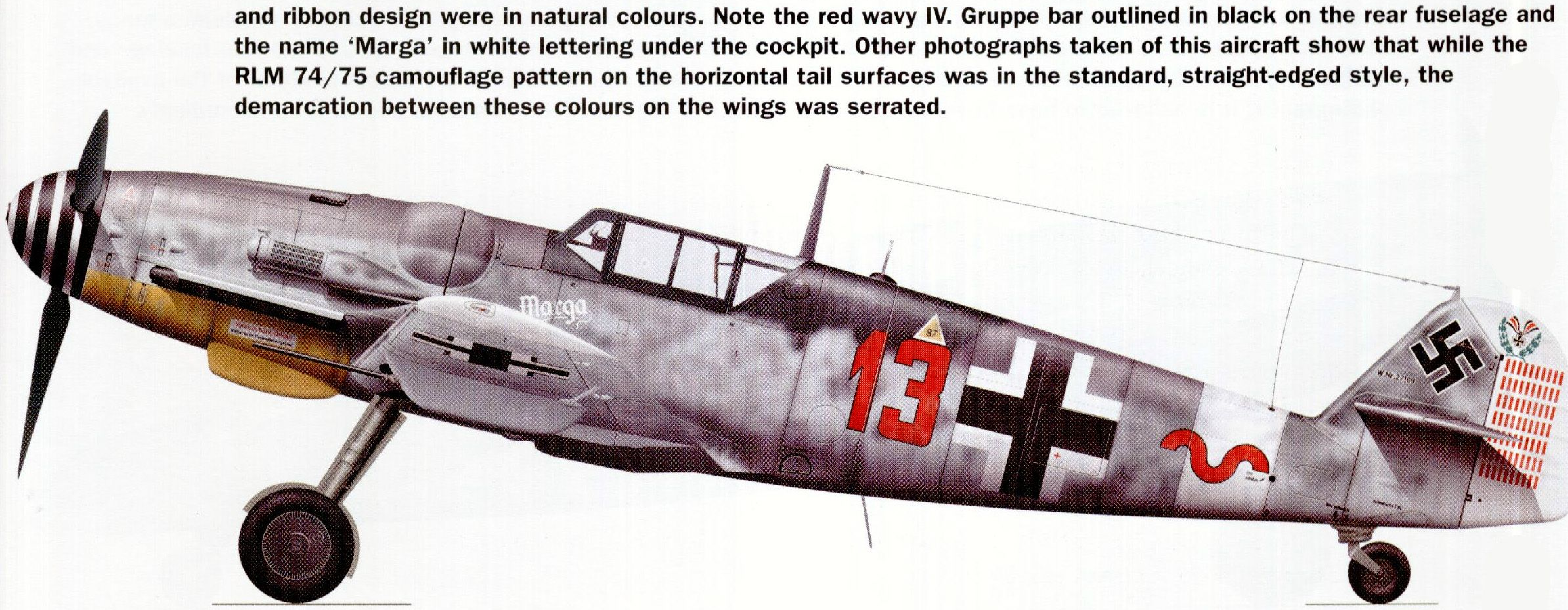


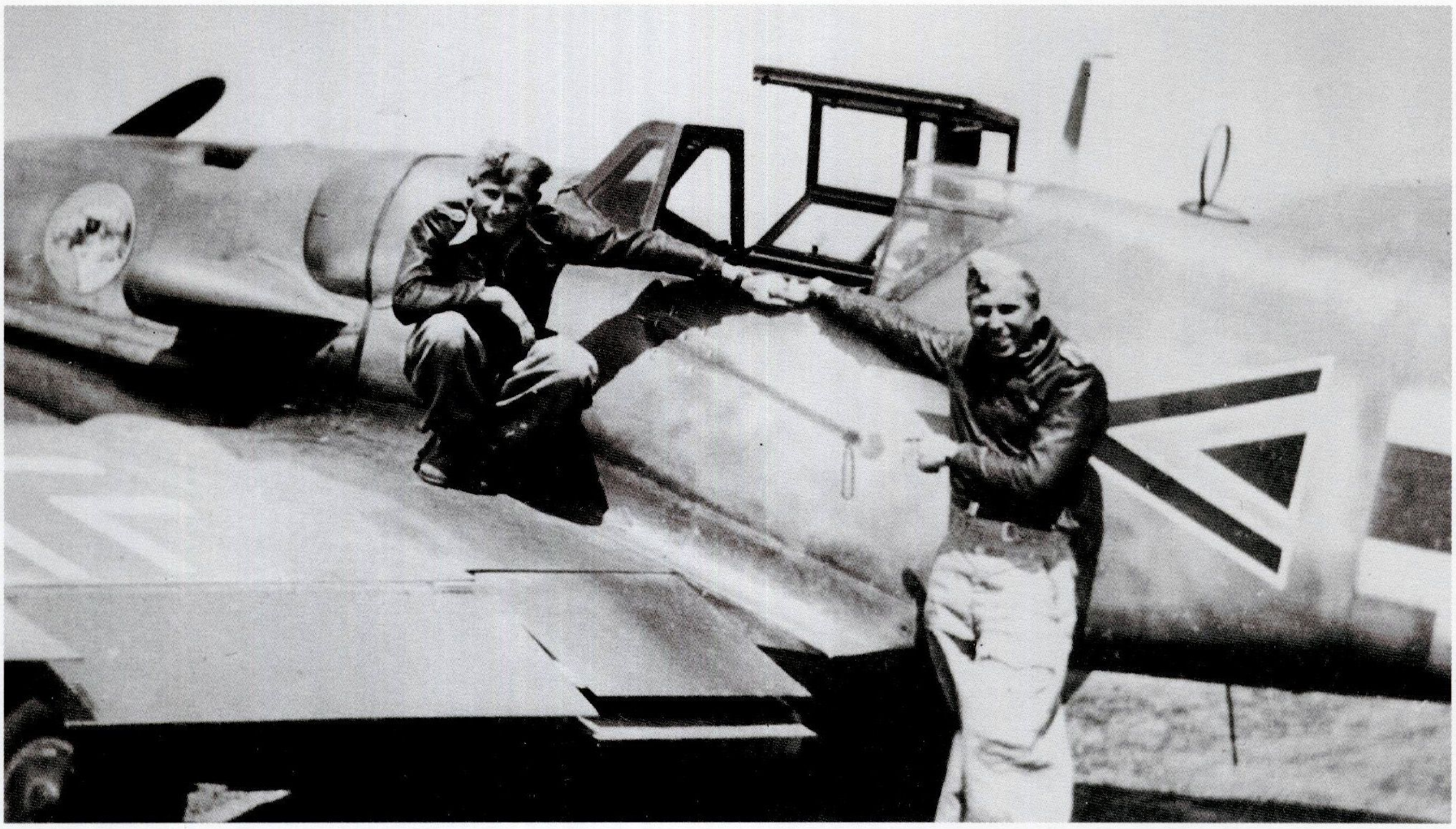
THIS PAGE: Shortly after noon on 15 November 1943, Ofw. Heinrich Bartels of IV./JG 27 shot down four P-38s, bringing his total tally to 70 victories. These photographs show Bartels at Kalamaki with the rudder of his Bf 109 G-6, 'Red 13', recording these latest successes and were probably taken later on the 15th or perhaps on the 16th, since on the 17th, Bartels increased his score with more multiple kills, claiming a B-25 and two more P-38s.

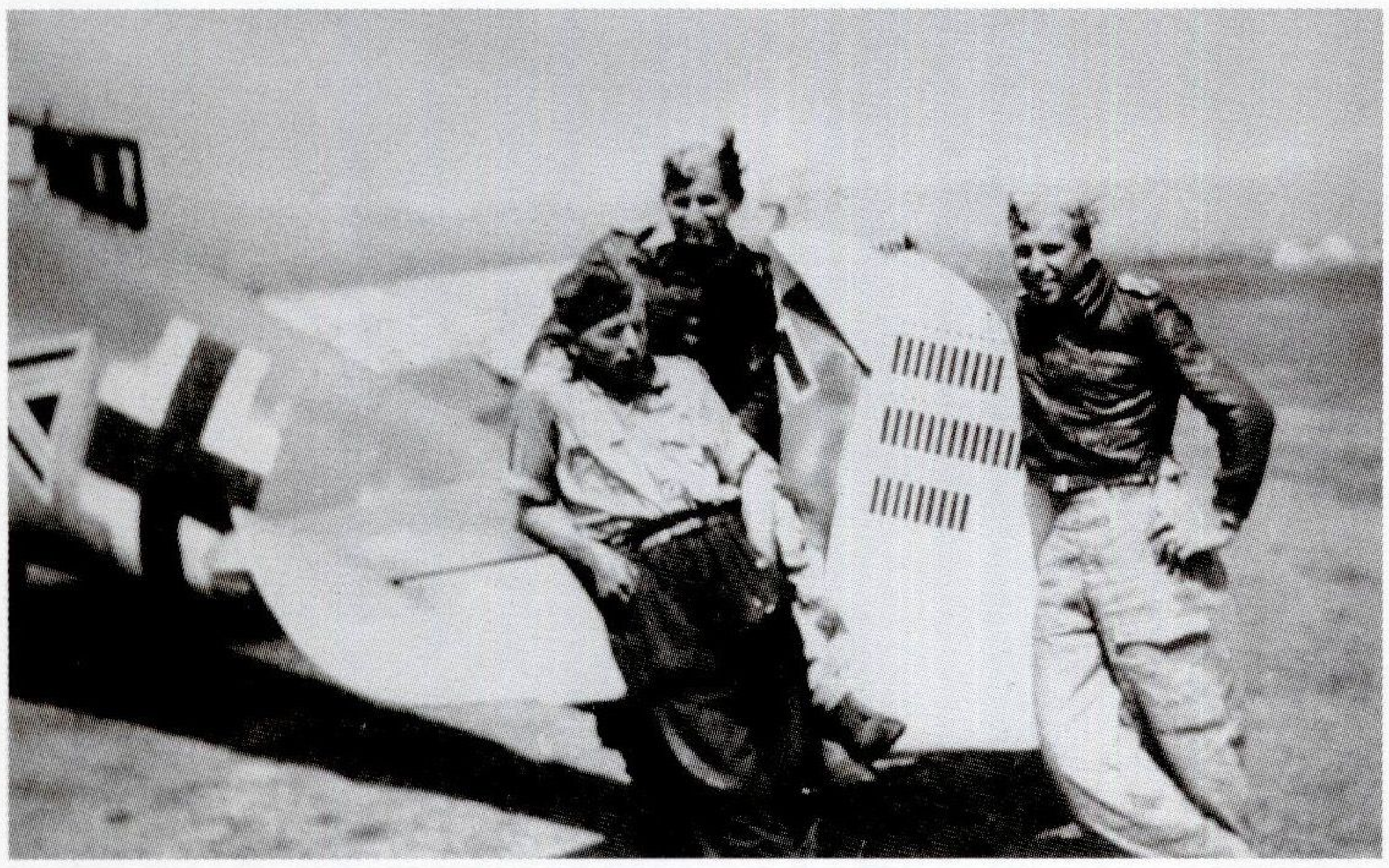


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Red 13' flown by Fw. Heinrich Bartels of 11./JG 27, November 1943

This aircraft, a Bf 109 G-6 trop, was equipped with underwing cannon and was finished in RLM 74, 75 and 76. The W.Nr. 27169 appeared in its usual place on the fin but in a rectangle of RLM 76 showing that the camouflage had been darkened with either RLM 74 or 75. The white rudder was marked with 70 red victory bars and the Ritterkreuz and ribbon design were in natural colours. Note the red wavy IV. Gruppe bar outlined in black on the rear fuselage and the name 'Marga' in white lettering under the cockpit. Other photographs taken of this aircraft show that while the RLM 74/75 camouflage pattern on the horizontal tail surfaces was in the standard, straight-edged style, the demarcation between these colours on the wings was serrated.

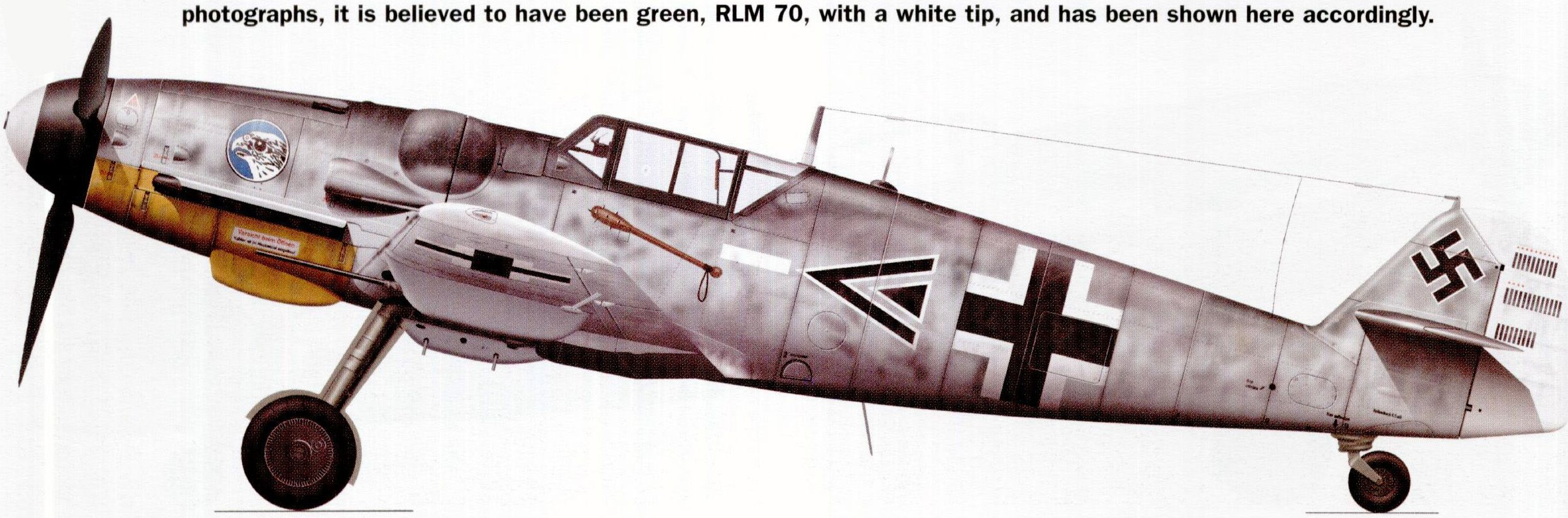


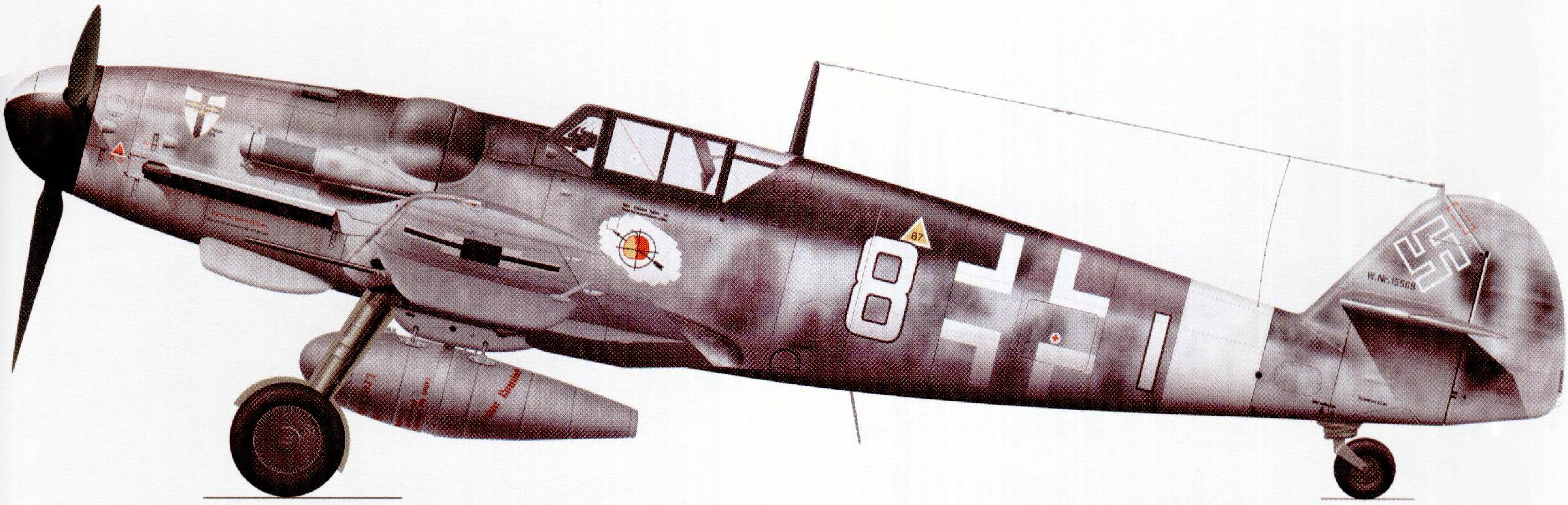




ABOVE AND LEFT: Hptm. Karl Rammelt was officially appointed Kommandeur of II./JG 51 on 7 June 1943 after previously leading the Gruppe temporarily. The following month, the Gruppe was withdrawn to Germany to rest and refit and, after returning to the Mediterranean theatre, its first combat took place over Italy on 19 December 1943. These photographs are believed to have been taken soon after the Gruppe's return as the rudder of Rammelt's Bf 109 G-6 is marked with 32 victory bars, the last of which is thought to have been a P-38 he destroyed on the 20th. In the photograph (*ABOVE*), Rammelt is pointing to his personal emblem, and just visible below Rammelt's outstretched arm is the white, horizontal bar of II. Gruppe.

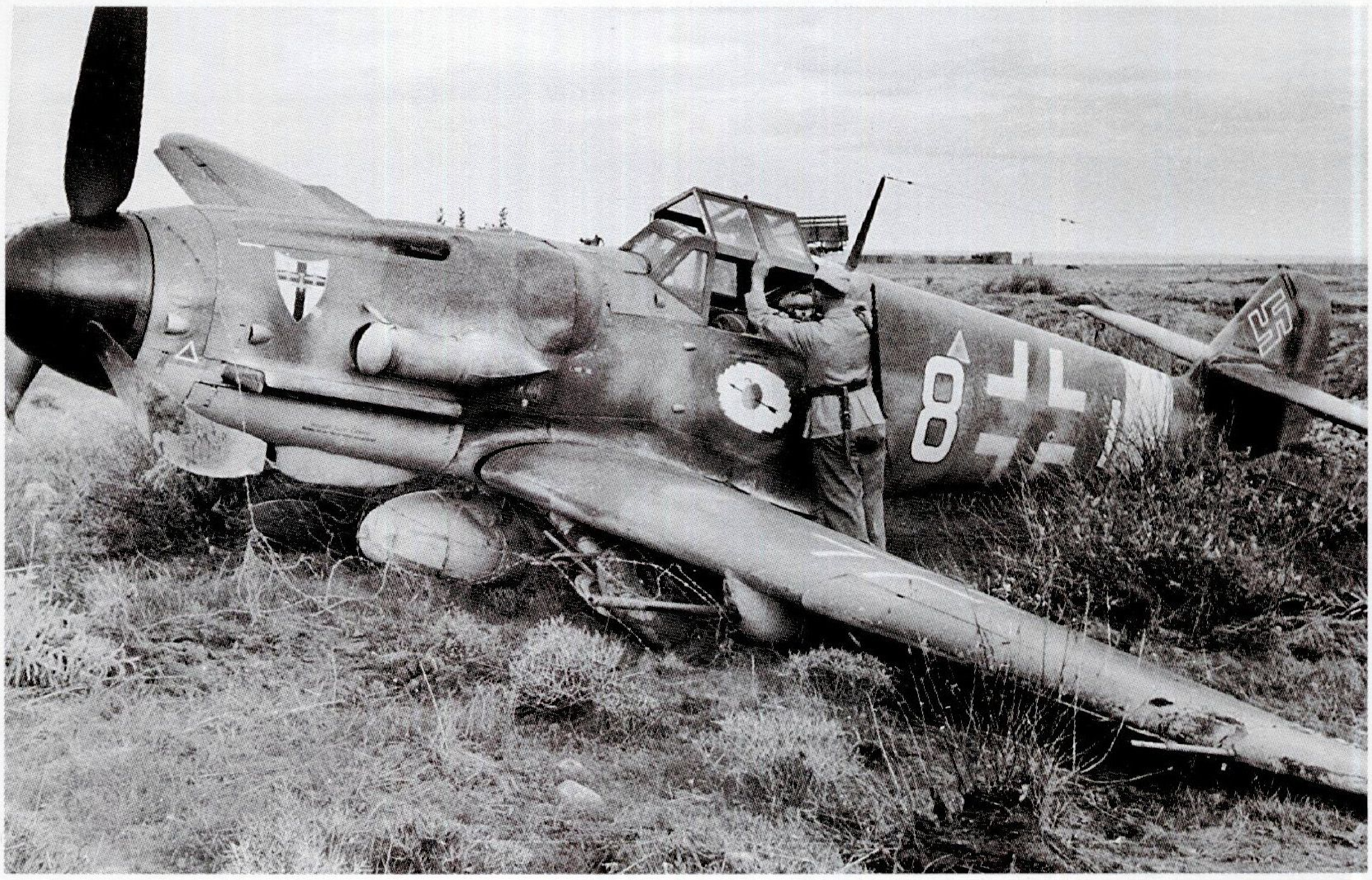
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 flown by Hptm. Karl Rammelt, Kommandeur of II./JG 51, December 1943
While finished in standard RLM 74 and 75 on the uppersurfaces and with RLM 76 undersurfaces, Hptm. Rammelt's machine is interesting in that it carries the badge of JG 51 on the cowling and the pilot's personal emblem, a mace, beneath the cockpit. The machine also had the white band of the Mediterranean theatre around the rear fuselage and a white horizontal Gruppe bar ahead of the Stab markings. Although the spinner is not visible in either of the available photographs, it is believed to have been green, RLM 70, with a white tip, and has been shown here accordingly.



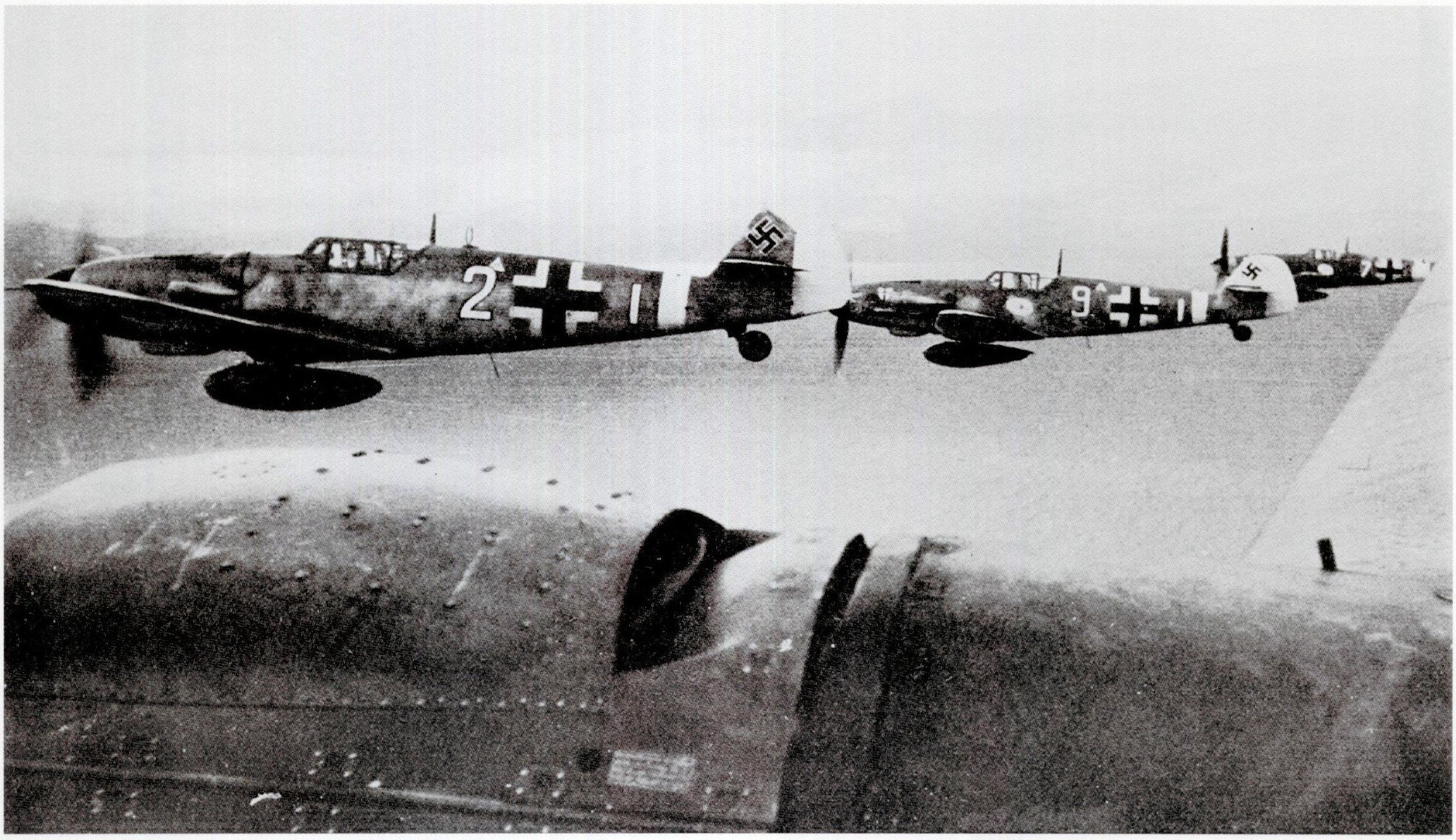


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'White 8' of 7./JG 27, Maleme, 1 December 1943

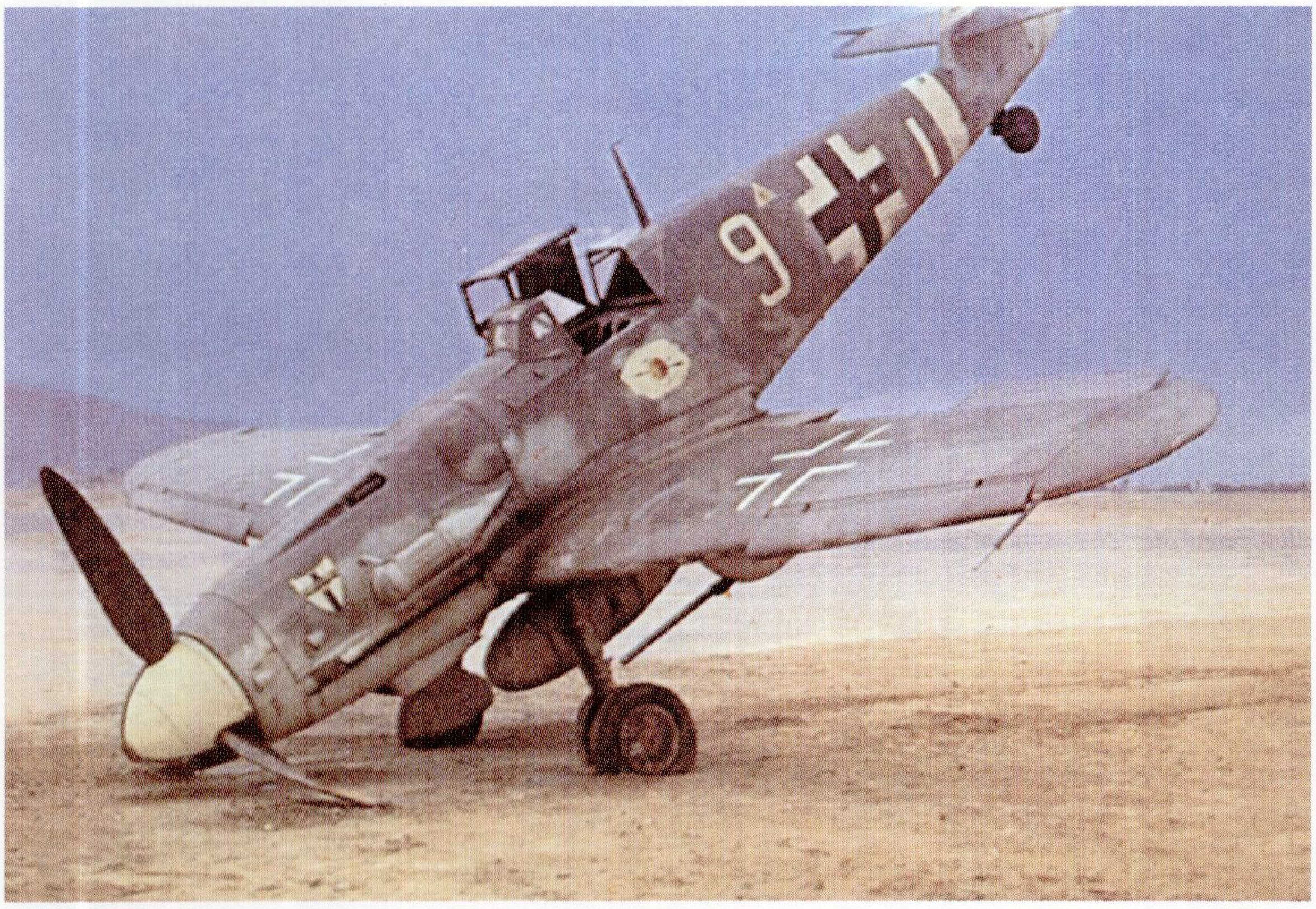
Showing very few signs of wear or weathering, this machine was finished in an RLM 74/75/76 scheme and carried the badge of III./JG 27 on the engine cowling and the Staffel badge under the cockpit. Unusually, this aircraft does not have a yellow panel under the nose and the only theatre marking was a fuselage band. Note the hard edge to the white spinner segment and that all national markings on the uppersurfaces were in the white outline style. The Werk Nummer 15508 appeared in the usual position on the tail.



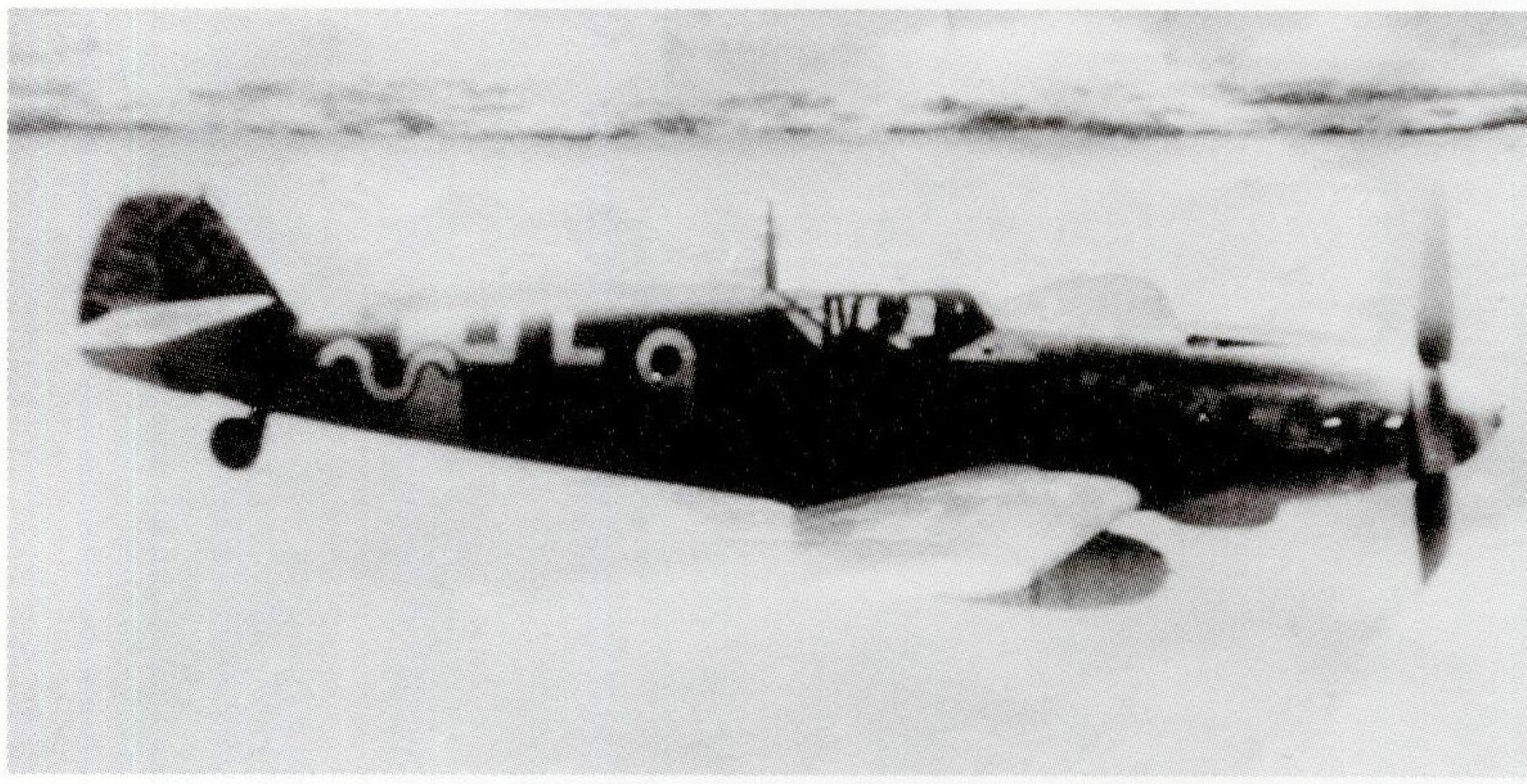
THIS PAGE: This Bf 109 G-6, 'White 8', W.Nr. 15508, belonged to 7./JG 27 and was photographed after a forced landing at Maleme, Crete, on 1 December 1943. As the propeller blades are little damaged, the engine was probably stopped at the time of the crash-landing, suggesting a fuel shortage or engine trouble. The pilot escaped injury and a later assessment recorded the damage as 15 per cent.



ABOVE: Schwarm of Bf 109 G-6s from 7./JG 27 photographed over the Aegean on 1 December 1943 while escorting an He 111 bringing General Alexander Holle and General Martin Fiebig to Crete. 'White 2', nearest the camera, was flown by Lt. Emil Clade, 'White 7' by Uffz. Franz Büsen and 'White 9' by Uffz. Rudolf Moycis. A fourth machine, 'White 1', flown by Uffz. Theo Heckmann, took up position on the port side of the Heinkel and is not shown. Of the three aircraft visible, 'White 7' and 'White 9' have air cleaners and the Staffel badge, first introduced in August or September, appears under the cockpit. MG 151 gondolas have been fitted only to 'White 9' and 'White 2' has a loop aerial behind the main radio mast. All aircraft, however, have dark green spinners with a one third white segment, and whereas 'White 2' had a white rudder, 'White 9' has the entire vertical tail area painted white.



ABOVE: The same 'White 9' as seen (*ABOVE*) after a landing accident. Note that although the camouflage was very similar to that on 'White 8', the subject of the profile (*PREVIOUS PAGE*), the fin as well as the rudder on this machine was white. The upper wing Balkenkreuze were the white outline style and, unlike 'White 8', the fuselage cross on this aircraft had a black centre.



RIGHT: This photograph shows another aircraft flown by Uffz. Moycis, also coded 'White 9', and was taken after Moycis transferred to the 10. Staffel. Note the different style of fuselage numeral and the wavy III. Gruppe bar. Uffz. Rudolf Moycis, was an Austrian and one of the best pilots of 7./JG 27. He remained with the Staffel when it was redesignated 10./JG 27 and claimed ten victories before, as an Oberfeldwebel, he was killed near Benerode, Germany, on 12 October 1944.

Codeword 'Shingle': the Allied landings at Anzio

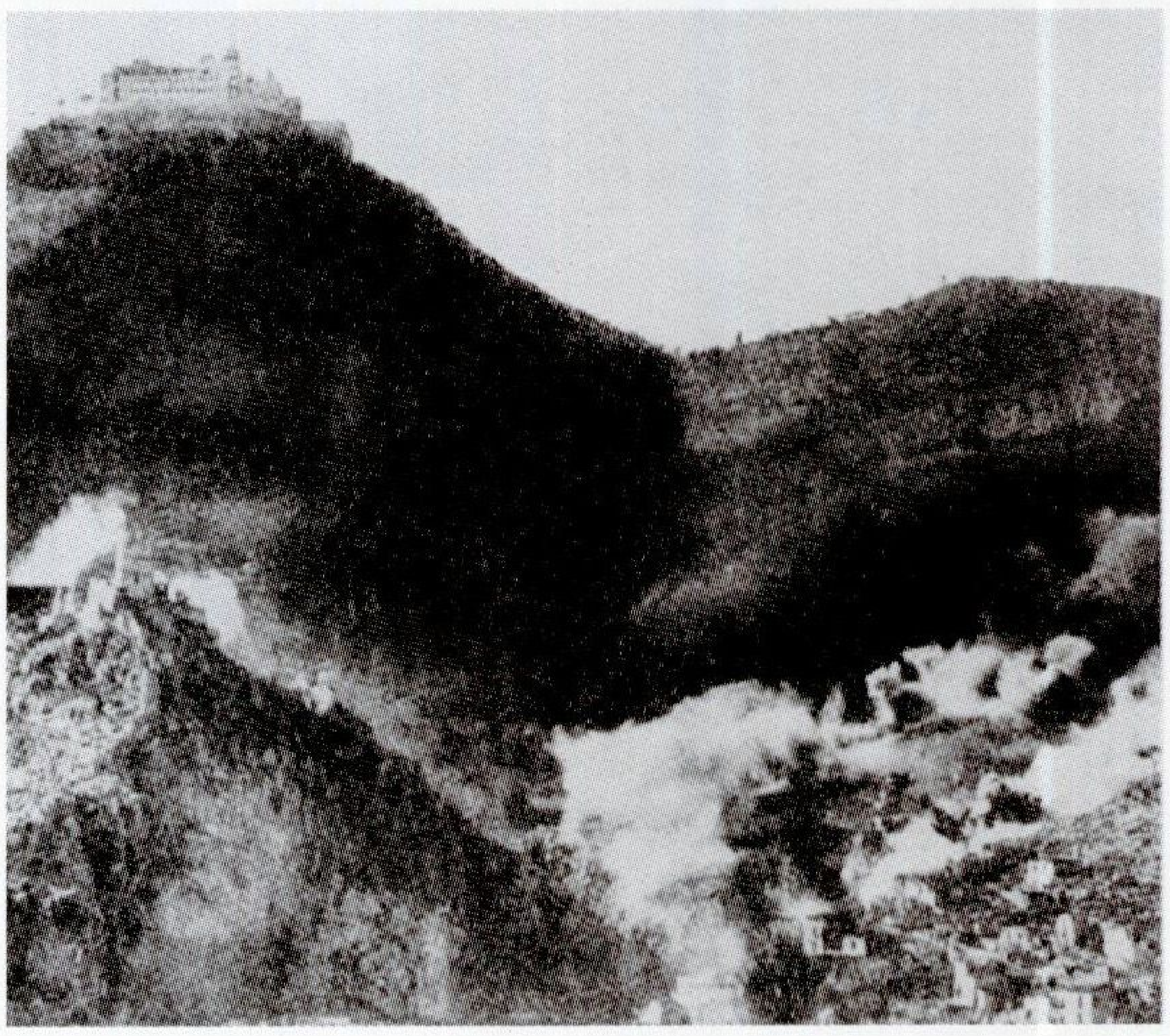
During the first part of January 1944, bad weather reigned over all of Italy and the situation was relatively quiet, allowing the German High Command time to re-organise its fighter units. *Hptm.* Theo Lindemann became the new *Kommandeur* of I./JG 77, II./JG 77 had begun to re-equip with Bf 109s, and the Italian I° *Gruppo Caccia* was subordinated to *Stab*/JG 77 where it was to reinforce defensive operations in the area of Turin. Meanwhile, I./JG 53 and I./JG 77 continued their dangerous missions over the front line near Cassino where I./JG 53 claimed 12 *Luftsiege*, four of them being awarded to *Oblt.* Seiz, the *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 53, the *Gruppe* losing one pilot while I./JG 77 lost two.

Later in the month II./JG 51 and I./JG 4 were transferred southwards to relieve I./JG 53 and I./JG 77. Under the temporary command of Günther Rubell, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 51, II./JG 51 moved to the Rome area while, on 6 January, I./JG 4 transferred to Osa, near Littorio. Four days later, I./JG 4 was in action for the first time since being transferred but had five of its pilots killed over Cassino and lost another three killed in flying incidents in return for seven victories in the period from the 10 to 22 January.

In the north, Bf 109 Gs of 4./JG 77, supported by the fighters of I° *Gruppo Caccia*, operated over Turin and, on the 3rd two pilots from this *Staffel* each claimed to have destroyed a P-38. On the 11th, II./JG 77 transferred from Lagnasco to Caselle, while I./JG 77 moved to Lagnasco five days later. On the 21st, I./JG 53 moved to Maniago, near Udine, while *Stab*/JG 53 was at Viterbo the following day.

On the 16th, III./JG 53 intercepted a large formation of bombers returning from a raid in Southern Germany but, hindered by the *Werfe*r, five of the *Gruppe's* pilots were killed and a sixth wounded by the bombers' fighter escort. This experience finally resulted in the unit abandoning the heavy armament as, in view of the overwhelming Allied escort, it placed the German fighters at too great a disadvantage. One brighter event, however, was the return of *Hptm.* Jürgen Harder who left his assignment with the *Stab* of II. *Fliegerkorps* and resumed command of his old *Staffel*, 7./JG 53. On the Cassino front, II./JG 51 claimed seven victories in January up to the 22nd but lost *Uffz.* Erich Lohmiller, an inexperienced pilot, who was shot down near Rome. Although Lohmiller baled out, he was killed when his parachute failed to open.

BELOW: A key town on the main Fifth Army Front was Cassino which barred the way to Rome and held up the Allied forces for a considerable time. This photograph shows Cassino Monastery, overlooking the town on the slope of Mount Cassino, as it appeared before an attack by Allied bombers and artillery on 15 February 1944.



Meanwhile, in preparation for the Anzio landings, due to take place on 22 January 1944, a major bombing offensive against the German airfields had begun on the 14th with further bombing on the 18th and 20th. The Allied plan was to land the US VI Corps behind the German lines at the same time as a frontal assault was launched on Cassino. VI Corps would advance rapidly inland, cut communications between Rome and Cassino, and either isolate the German 10. *Armee* or compel it to abandon the western end of the Gustav Line. The landings took place as planned but were a failure as, once ashore, the commander of VI Corps failed to press his advantage by advancing inland. Reacting swiftly as usual, Kesselring assembled an improvised force which was able to pin down the invaders until a larger force was available for a counterattack.

A particular consequence of the Anzio landings, both in the area of the beachhead and the main battle line, was noticed by Allied intelligence, which reported *"...a striking increase in the number of tactical reconnaissance sorties flown in central Italy. An average of five pairs of Me 109s were engaged on this task every day over the Fifth Army front and the beachhead."* Indeed, the Bf 109s of 1. and 2./NAG 11, previously 2.(*H*)/14 and 4.(*H*)/12 respectively, flew continuously over these areas and, as *Lt.* Walter Stoyhe, a pilot with 2./NAG 11, remembered:

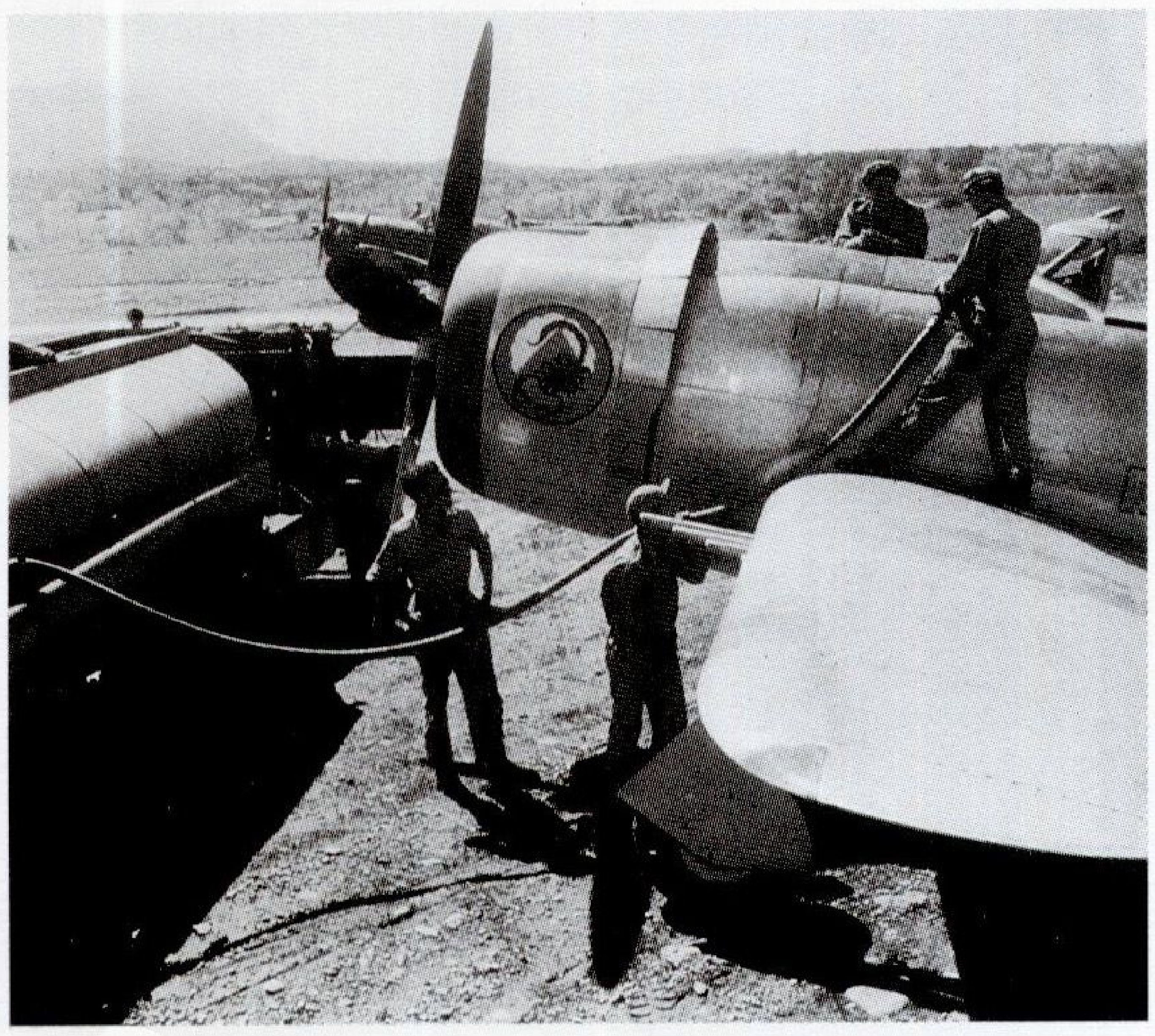
> *"For the missions over Cassino, we had to fly unescorted and I was hit twice by enemy fire and had to make a crash-landing. Over the invasion area, our Rotte had to be protected by at least six of our own fighters flying far above, ready to dive on any attacking fighter."*

The German fighters, however, also had other priorities and were required to fly escort for the Fw 190 fighter-bombers of the recently-formed ground-attack unit *Schlachtgeschwader* 4 which was heavily engaged in the Anzio area. Some of the *Jabo* pilots did more than make hit and run raids and engaged in aerial combat, *Ofw.* Heinz Schmitt of 5./SG 4, for example, claiming a Spitfire south of Rome on 22 January, while *Lt.* Gärtner of *Stab* II./SG 4 shot down another over Anzio on the 28th.

Lt. Otto Schulz of 5./JG 51 claimed two victories over the invasion area on the 22nd, but was then himself shot down and obliged to bale out, and on the 29th and 30th, II./JG 51 lost two more of its pilots. On the same day, I./JG 4 suffered a very severe blow when the *Kommandeur*, *Hptm.* Franz Hahn, was shot down near Littorio in a battle with P-38s and P-40s. So ended the life of a courageous and experienced leader who had flown since the beginning of the war and had been credited with around 20 victories. Two of his comrades were also shot down, one, *Fw.* Manfred Reiter having a lucky escape when he baled out too low for his parachute to open but was saved when the canopy caught on the balcony of a building. On the 23rd, I./JG 4 transferred to Fabrica di Roma in order to be nearer the front line and, a few days later, *Oblt.* Walter Hoeckner arrived from the West as Hahn's successor. Hoeckner had previously flown with 7./JG 52 in 1940, had led 1./JG 26, and had also flown with II./JG 77 in Russia. In June 1943, he had been appointed *Kommandeur* of II./JG 1 and, when he arrived to take over from Hahn, Hoeckner had some 60 victories.

Towards the end of the month, I./JG 77 transferred from Lavariano to Gorizia in the Italian Tyrol in order to be in a position to intercept Allied bombers flying to targets in Bavaria or Austria. On the 24th, a great battle occurred over the Alps and on the 30th, during a raid in the Udine area, the Bf 109s had their first encounter in this theatre with P-47 Thunderbolts which, operating from landing grounds in Southern Italy, further reinforced the Allied air forces. Another *Gruppenkommandeur* was lost on 29 January when *Hptm.* Siegfried Freytag, *Kommandeur* of II./JG 77, who had a particular fear of being attacked on the ground, was wounded in just such an incident. Freytag and his men were caught during a surprise attack by four Spitfires at Siena and the *Kommandeur* was severely wounded while running for the protection of a trench. He was therefore forced to take temporary leave of his *Gruppe* and was replaced by *Oblt.* Emil Omert, *Kapitän* of 8./JG 77, who arrived from Rumania to take command.

BELOW: P-47s of the US 64th Fighter Squadron, 57th Fighter Group being refuelled in Italy. In spite of disparaging performance data given by the highest Luftwaffe authorities, German pilots feared and respected these aircraft.



Over Southern France, where the USAAF had become more active, two pilots of JGr. *Süd* each claimed a victory in the Marseilles area on the 21st. On the 27th, two pilots of JGr. *Süd* again scored a victory each, while *Ofw.* Siegfried Lemke of I./JG 2 was credited with three of the five *Luftsiege* claimed that day by the pilots of the *Gruppe*.

In the Balkans, the situation was quieter and III./JG 27, operating in the Aegean area, claimed only two B-17s on 24 January. In Yugoslavia, IV./JG 27 shot down three aircraft but lost *Oblt.* Werner Küfner, *Staffelführer* of 12./JG 27, on the 12th. Two days later, the *Gruppe's* airfield at Mostar was heavily bombed and Skopje was attacked on the 24th. On the 31st, *Uffz.* Stoll of 11./ZG 26, the only *Staffel* with Ju 88 C heavy fighters in this otherwise Bf 110-equipped *Geschwader*, shot down a Beaufighter over the Aegean.

BELOW: A British Sherman tank and a section of infantry moving up along a road north of Anzio following the landings on 22 January 1944. By 3 February the Allied beachhead at Anzio had been extended to about 14 miles wide by an average depth of eight miles although the spearhead of the attack extended beyond that. However, swift German counter-action soon contained the beachhead and it was another five months before the Anzio force could begin its advance on Rome.

On two fronts

On 3 February, the Germans launched the first of three counterattacks against the Anzio-Nettuno beachhead which, although lacking adequate support from the *Luftwaffe*, succeeded in reducing the perimeter and tied down the Allied forces. That day, II./JG 51 suffered a heavy blow when, apparently, the entire *Gruppe* took off to intercept Marauders approaching from Sardinia. According to *Oblt.* Alfons Schertl[5] "*The group intercepted the Marauder formation not far from Civitavecchia. […] The formation was flying without fighter cover. […] They flew like meteors. Nothing could shake their formation. When they saw the Messerschmitts diving on them they closed their formation and regrouped in impeccable order, giving each other cover […]. Our sixteen machines split up into four sections and attacked the fifty bombers.*"

In the ensuing fight, *Hptm.* Herbert Puschmann, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 51, shot down one B-26 but his Bf 109 G-6 was hit by the bombers' defensive fire and crashed, killing the Silesian ace whose B-26 that day brought his tally to 54 victories. Puschmann seems to have been liked by

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[5] Writing under the pseudonym Peter Henn, Alfons Schertl was the author of 'The Last Battle'.

ABOVE: Pilots of 6./JG 51 at Lavariano. The officer on the far left with the 'Jagdgeschwader Mölders' cuff title is the Kapitän, Hptm. Herbert Puschmann, who reached a score of 54 victories before being killed on 3 February 1944 during an engagement with a US B-26 medium bomber. He was posthumously awarded the Ritterkreuz.

his comrades, Schertl writing of him: "*Herbert was irreplaceable. He was the patron of his young comrades in aerial combat, our friend and spiritual father rolled into one. When we lost him the group lost its moral insulation.*" In the same fight, *Ofw.* Wilhelm Mink of 5./JG 51, another *Ritterkreuzträger* and an ace with 69 *Abschüsse*, had to bale out of his G-6. He was found, severely wounded and had to leave the unit, never to return. After recovering, he was sent to various schools units and was killed over Germany in March 1945 while flying with EJG 1. Thus, in a single engagement with twin-engined bombers, II./JG 51 lost two experienced and highly decorated pilots and, as if proof was needed that the *Gruppe* had now almost reached the limit of its endurance, in the rest of the month it claimed only another three *Luftsiege*.

Near the front line, II./JG 77, I./JG 4 and III./JG 53 flew *freie Jagd* missions over Anzio and Cassino and also continued to provide escort for the *Jabos* of SG 4 which, as well as releasing their bombs over ground targets, continued to shoot down Allied aircraft, the unit's pilots claiming three more victories before the end of the month, two being credited to *Lt.* Kulpa of *Stab*/SG 4.

In the north, I./JG 77 and I./JG 53 defended the Alps and Northern Italy, but JG 77 lost ten pilots in return for a mere 14 *Luftsiege*. The main losses occurred in II./JG 77, this *Gruppe* having moved to Giuliana on the 14th and, despite its dangerous missions, *Hptm.* Emil Omert, still the temporary *Kommandeur*, made two claims as his 65th and 66th victories.

Luftwaffe and ANR Units in Italy, 13 February 1944

Note: Figures are for serviceable aircraft only.

C. Giubello:	Stab/NAGr. 11	Bf 109	(2)
Littorio:	2./NAGr. 11	Bf 109	(7)
Fabriano:	*Stab* and I./SG 4	Fw 190	(4)
	II./SG 4	Fw 190	(16)
	Stab/JG 53	Bf 109	(2)
	1./NAGr. 11	Bf 109	(7)
Tuscania:	II./JG 51	Bf 109	(20)
Orvieto:	III./JG 53	Bf 109	(20)
Brolio:	II./JG 77	Bf 109	(20)
Perugia:	*Stab*/122and 1./123	Ju 88	(3)
	2./122	Me 410	(2)
Piacenza:	I./SG 4 (without ground personnel)	Fw 190	(unknown)
Pinerolo:	*Stab*/JG 77	Bf 109	
Caselle:	1./NSG 9 (being formed)	Ca.314, Ju 87 and possibly CR.42	(unknown)
Aviano:	*Stab* and II./KG 76	Ju 88	(7)
	Stab, I. and III./LG 1	Ju 88	(27)
Maniago:	I./JG 53	Bf 109	(27)
Villaorba:	I./KG 76	Ju 88	(10)
Udine:	I° *Gruppo Caccia*	C.205	(12)
Lavariano:	I./JG 77	Bf 109	(30)
Venezia:	2./196	Ar 196	(2)
Bergamo:	*Eins. Gr.* KG 30	Ju 88	(23)
		Total:	242 aircraft of all types, of which 120 were fighters.

ABOVE: A B-26 Marauder bombing a target in the Po Valley.

Despite the overwhelming number of Allied aircraft, JG 53 was quite successful and claimed 24 *Luftsiege* in February for the loss of four pilots killed and two taken prisoner south of Rome. Of these victories, three were awarded to *Hptm.* Jürgen Harder, the new *Kapitän* of 7./JG 53, and four to *Fw.* Müller of 7./JG 53, so bringing his total to 11. On 15 February, the day the monastery at Monte Cassino was all but destroyed by Allied bombers, Harder was ordered north to succeed *Major* Müller as the commander of I./JG 53.

Oblt. Walter Hoeckner's I./JG 4 was again in action and claimed a total of 20 victories in February but lost seven pilots, five of whom were killed and two taken prisoner. Almost half these losses occurred during a single operation over the Anzio beachhead on the 6th which resulted in the loss of the two men captured and one pilot killed.

By the end of February, the fighter force in Italy had been reinforced with the arrival of I./JG 2. Previously based at Aix-en-Provence, the *Gruppe* had operated in the defence of Southern France where, on the 4th, it had shot down two B-17s, one of which was claimed by *Ofw.* Siegfried Lemke, a talented pilot of 1. *Staffel* also credited with shooting down four Spitfires on the 9th. By the 20th, I./JG 2 had begun arriving in Italy. The *Gruppe* transferred to Castiglione del Lago on Lake Trasimeno on the 25th and engaged in its first significant combat on the 29th when, for the loss of one pilot killed and one wounded over the Nettuno area, it claimed six victories, two of which were again awarded to *Ofw.* Lemke.

In the Balkans, III./JG 27 was more successful, pilots from the *Gruppe* claiming 19 victories, a total which included seven Beaufighters on the 9th, for the loss of only one pilot killed. In the middle of the month, the bulk of the *Gruppe* transferred to Skopje, leaving 7. *Staffel* in Greece to defend the airspace over the Aegean Sea. However, at the end of February, III./JG 27, less 7. *Staffel*, was ordered out of the Mediterranean area and began preparing for its move to Wien-Seyring where it would soon be engaged in *Reichsverteidigung* duties. The III./JG 27 had first arrived in the theatre at the end of 1941, so that when it left the Mediterranean in early March, it had served in the area for more than two years, having seen action in Africa, Italy and Greece.

The only parts of the *Geschwader* left behind were, therefore, IV./JG 27, based at Nisch in Yugoslavia, and 7./JG 27 in Greece. The latter, under the command of *Lt.* Hans-Gunnar Culemann, was a reinforced *Staffel* with more than the usual establishment of aircraft, and remained in the Crete–Attica–Peloponnese area to protect the Aegean region.

Moves and Departures

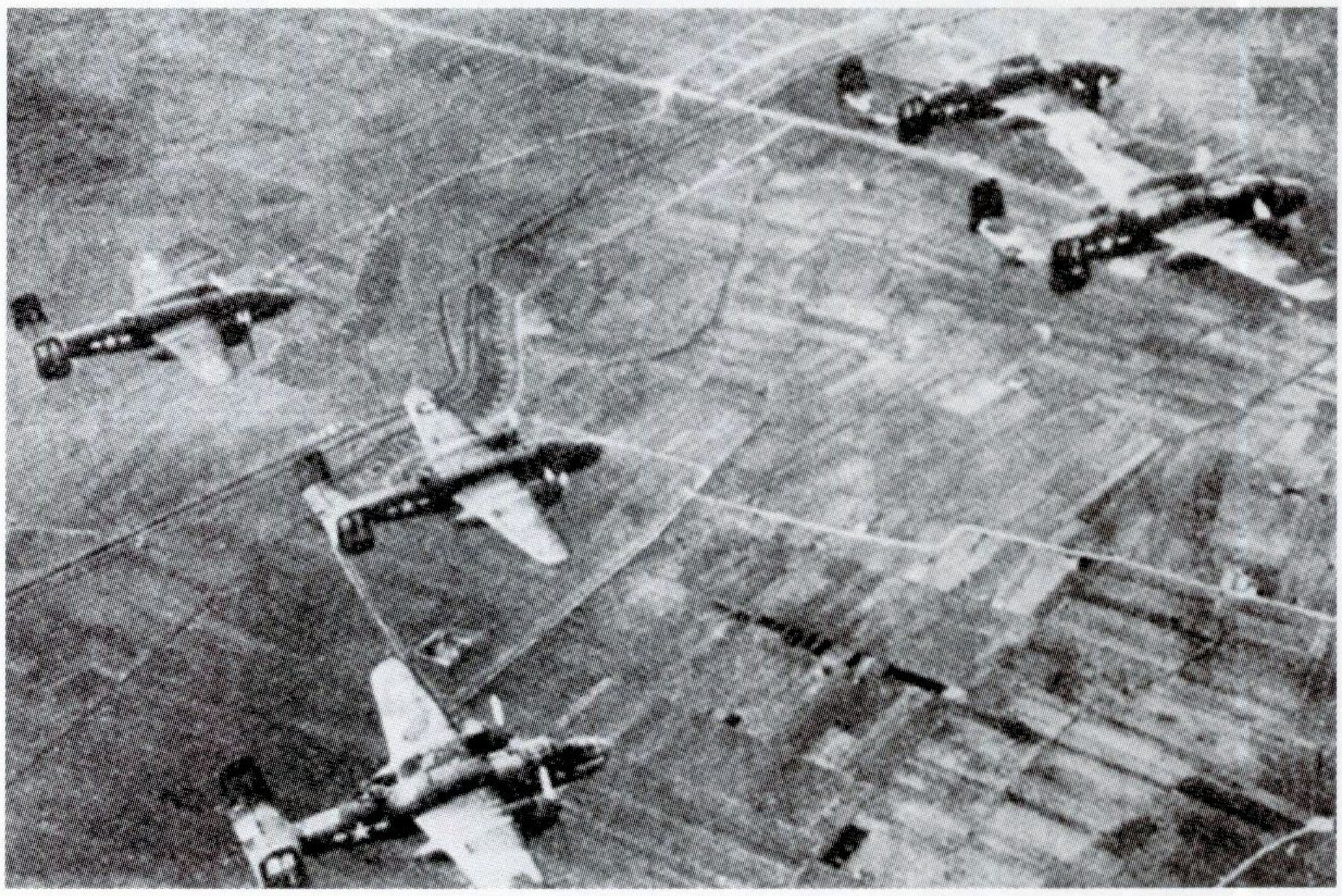
Although the departure of most of III./JG 27 weakened the air defence of the Balkans, this was a quiet area and during February IV./JG 27 submitted no claims and had suffered only one loss. To replace the departing *Gruppe*, the depleted II./JG 51 left Italy to join IV./JG 27 at Nisch.

In complete contrast, I./JG 4 was heavily engaged over the Anzio beachhead where, although it claimed six *Luftsiege*, six of its pilots were killed. In addition, *Hptm.* Manfred Spenner, *Kapitän* of 3./JG 4, was shot down for the second time in only a few weeks. This veteran, credited with nine victories over Italy, had been the victim of anti-aircraft fire the previous month, but while on that occasion he landed within his own lines, he was less fortunate on 9 March and, although baling out successfully, came down within Allied lines and was captured. On the 17th, I./JG 4 was ordered to Ferrara in Northern Italy so that it could be rested, but at the end of the month it lost another *Expert* when *Oblt.* Hans-Wilhelm Schopper, *Kapitän* of 2./JG 4, was ordered away to become a training instructor. Schopper, a veteran previously with III./JG 77 and then credited with about 15 victories, was replaced by his friend *Lt.* Reinhold Schmetzer, another veteran of III./JG 77 with at least 30 victories.

Also leaving Italy was *Ofw.* Herbert Kaiser, a pilot who had joined 3./JG 77 a few days before the Sicilian campaign and now had 48 victories, who was transferred to 7./JG 1 operating in the West.

Meanwhile, the various *Gruppen* of JG 77 were now operating in different areas. In Northern Italy, I./JG 77 claimed a number of B-17s attacking targets there or bombing German and Austrian cities, while II./JG 77 operated over the Anzio beachhead, mainly escorting the *Jabos* of SG 4, and III./JG 77 was still in Rumania. Throughout March, the *Geschwader* lost six pilots killed or captured but claimed 23 victories, most of these being achieved by I./JG 77. In one mission on the 19th, this *Gruppe* was in action against four-engined bombers over Yugoslavia, but although it only accounted for two of the bombers, six of its Bf 109 Gs were destroyed and two pilots killed.

As we have already seen, pilots could be lost to a unit without being killed, a typical example of this being the case of *Uffz.* Hermann Wich-Fähndrich. Having joined 6./JG 77 in January 1944, he flew about 15 war flights in Italy before crashing near Rome on 30 March following an engagement with B-25s, when he claimed one which was probably not confirmed. After a time in the *Lazarett* at Bad Wiessee, he hoped to return to II./JG 77 but, at the beginning of June, the Allies landed in Normandy and Wich-Fähndrich had to join a pool of fighter pilots, mostly from JG 77, who had volunteered for active duty or were returning after recovering from wounds. These pilots were despatched to join JG 27 and *Uffz.* Wich-Fähndrich, assigned to 3./JG 27, was shot down over France and captured in the Cherbourg area on 19 July 1944.



ABOVE: B-25 medium bombers of the 12th US Air Force on their way to a target south of Rome. In addition to supporting the beachhead battles, Allied medium bombers also operated well in the rear, bombing lines of communication, interrupting the flow of supplies and war materials to the front lines and disrupting troop movements.

JG 53 lost 18 pilots killed and two made PoWs in March. In Northern Italy, *Hptm.* Harder, *Kommandeur* of I./JG 53, claimed one victory before being wounded on the 11th but quickly recovered and claimed his 44th and 45th victories on the 28th. Similarly, *Lt.* Ruppert Wenninger, *Staffelführer* of 1./JG 53, claimed two P-47s on 18 March, his tenth and eleventh victories, but was shot down and wounded in the process.

Meanwhile, III./JG 53 operated over the main battle lines in the Cassino and the Anzio/Nettuno beachhead areas on 13 days in March, flying 391 sorties in 35 operations. Although the *Gruppe* was credited with a total of 44 claims, this had no effect on Allied air superiority. Although the *Gruppe* lost 25 aircraft in the month, only ten were due to enemy action while others were due to bad airfield conditions, running out of fuel and a surprising nine which were damaged on the ground through faulty handling. Personnel losses were relatively light, one pilot being killed, two taken prisoner, one missing and two wounded, the last including *Lt.* Alfred Seidl, *Staffelführer* of 7./JG 53, who was shot down on the 22nd. Even the experienced pilots of I./JG 2 suffered casualties, and despite claiming some 38 *Abschüsse* in the month, five or six of the *Gruppe's* pilots were lost[6].

The short-range reconnaissance *Gruppe* NAG 11 was very active from the beginning of the fighting in central Italy and, in a very rare occurrence, accounted for some victories. At 06.15 hrs on 26 March a pair of Bf 109s from 2. *Staffel*, flown by *Ofw.* Ludwig Ebbinghaus and his comrade *Ofw.* Hans Spötting, were operating over the Gulf of Gaeta when they encountered some Spitfire Vs and claimed two shot down. Later that day, however, Ebbinghaus was killed over Aprilia.

Left alone to defend Southern France, JGr. *Süd* fought against US aircraft on the 4th, 7th and 11th and, of the total of seven confirmed claims, three were attributed to the very active *Oblt.* Ernst-Georg Altnorthoff and two to *Ogfr.* Horst Rippert.

In the Balkans, the pilots of the reinforced 7./JG 27 fought bravely over the Aegean, claiming nine victories for no losses. In one engagement between Crete and mainland Greece on the 6th, the *Staffel* intercepted an unescorted formation of Marauders from 24 Sqn. SAAF. Although six of the bombers were claimed, four were actually lost, but this was sufficient for 6 March to be named "The Marauder Mauling Day".

In mid-March, IV./JG 27 left the Balkans and moved to Graz where, as with most of the *Geschwader's* other *Gruppen*, it flew in defence of the *Reich*. The departure of the IV. Gruppe left 7./JG 27 as the only part of the *Geschwader* in the Mediterranean.

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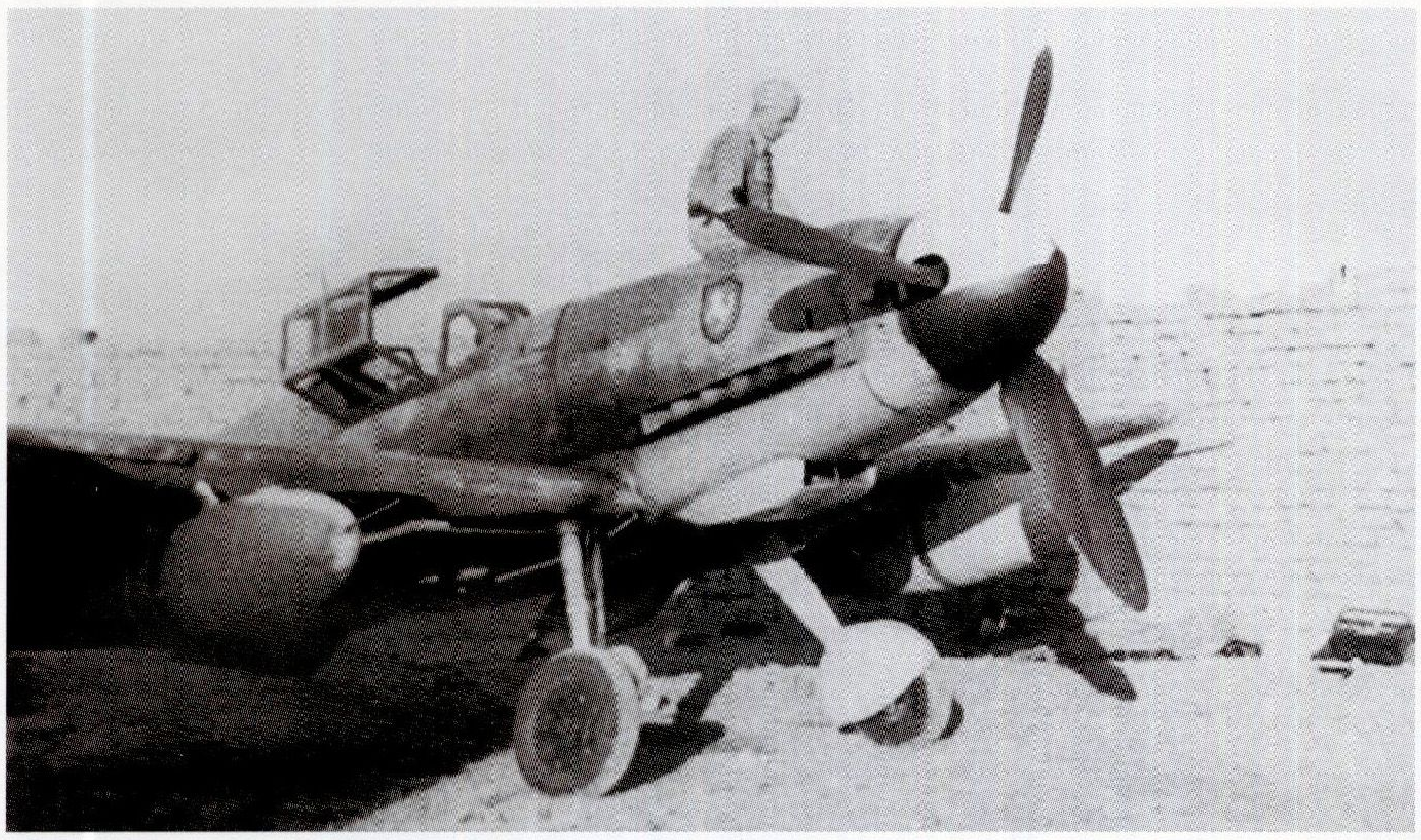
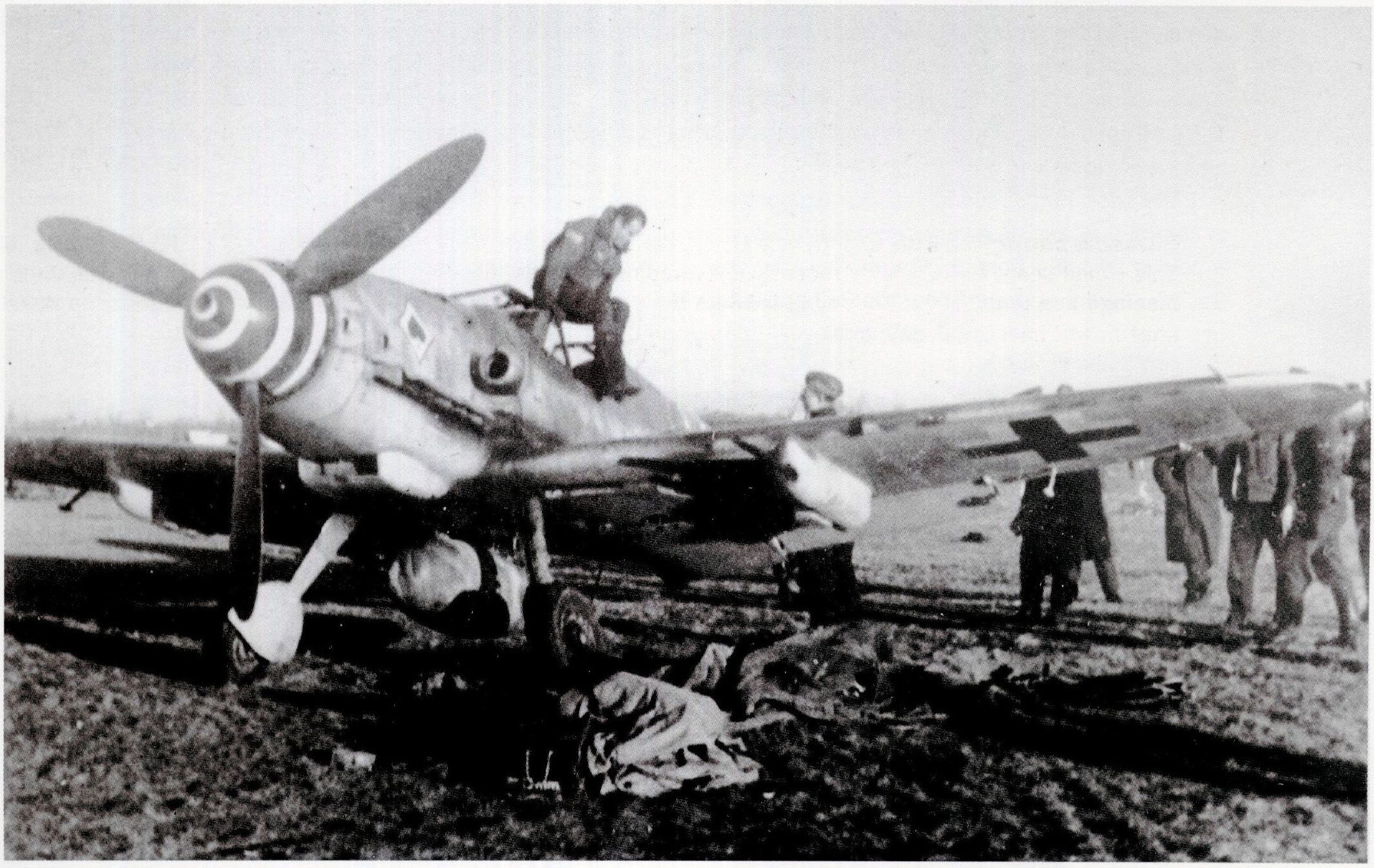
[6] The most successful pilots of I./JG 2 that month were: Fhj.Ofw. Siegfried Lemke of I. Staffel with 12 victories; Uffz. Rudolf Wirtgen, also of 1./JG 2, with five; and Lt. Detlev Grossfuss, Staffelkapitän of 3./JG 2, with three.

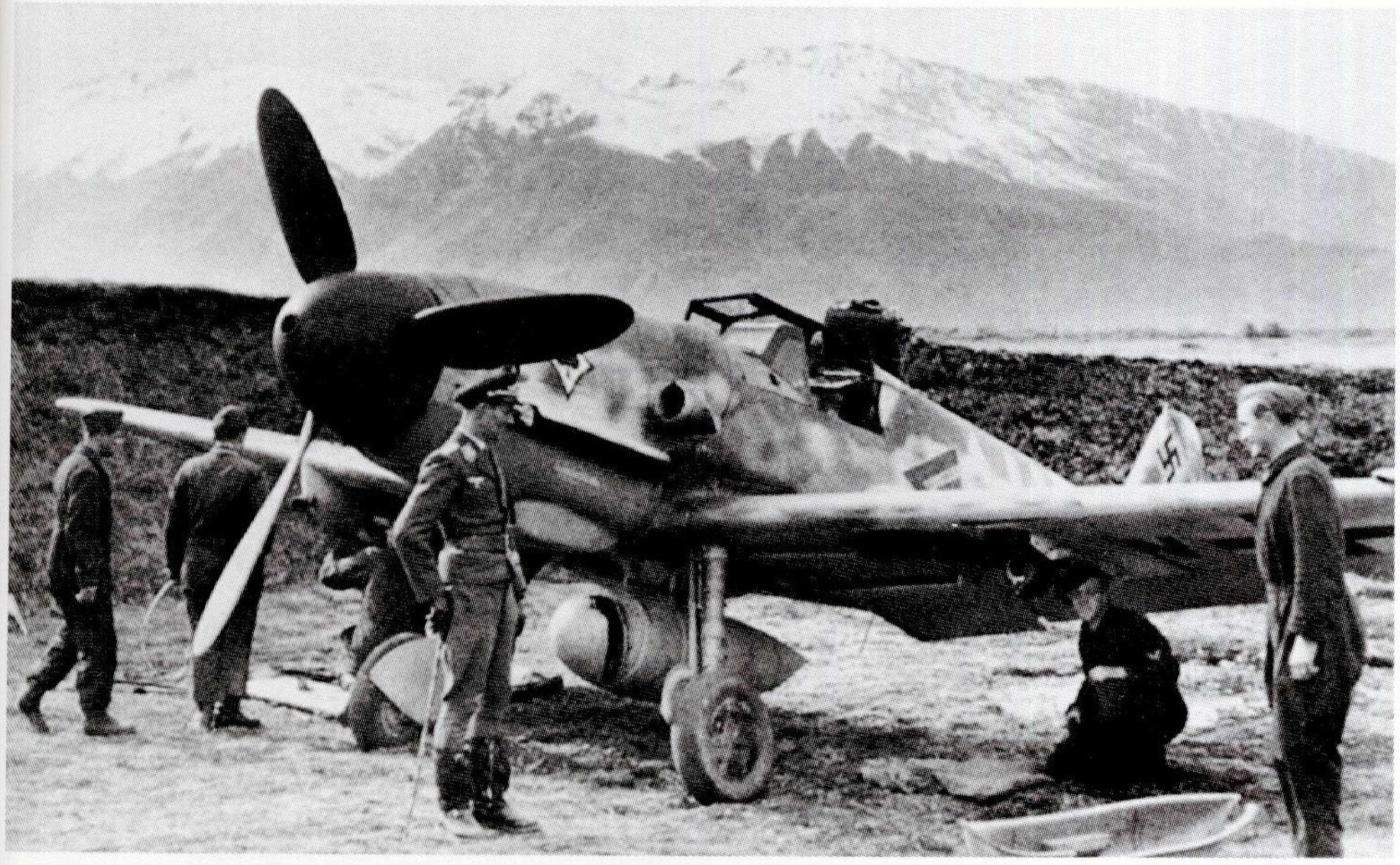


ABOVE: A Bf 109 G of NAG 11. To increase the aircraft's endurance during long-range reconnaissance missions, some of this unit's machines were equipped to carry two 300 litre auxiliary fuel tanks. This particular example carries the unit emblem, a white horse on a red shield. NAG 11 consisted of a Stab, 1. and 2. Staffel until some time in March 1944 when a 3. Staffel was formed, but this was disbanded three months later. The remaining parts of the Gruppe continued to operate over Central and Northern Italy but by the beginning of May 1945 only the 2. Staffel remained. Most of this Staffel's personnel are then believed to have withdrawn to Austria leaving at least 15 of their aircraft behind at Campoformido-Udine and elsewhere. Although a reconnaissance unit, on rare occasions a few of its pilots achieved aerial victories although, to save weight and in accordance with common practice in reconnaissance units, the two machine guns in the cowling were usually deleted and armament consisted of only the central, engine-mounted MG 151. Some exceptions to this generalisation have been recorded, notably at Aviano where a Bf 109 G-8/R5 was found to have two MG 131s in addition to the one MG 151.

BELOW: Major Franz Götz, seen on the left, was Kommandeur of III./JG 53 from October 1942 until mid-January 1945. In this photograph, taken in Northern Italy, Götz is seen talking to a Luftwaffe Kriegsberichter, or war correspondent.

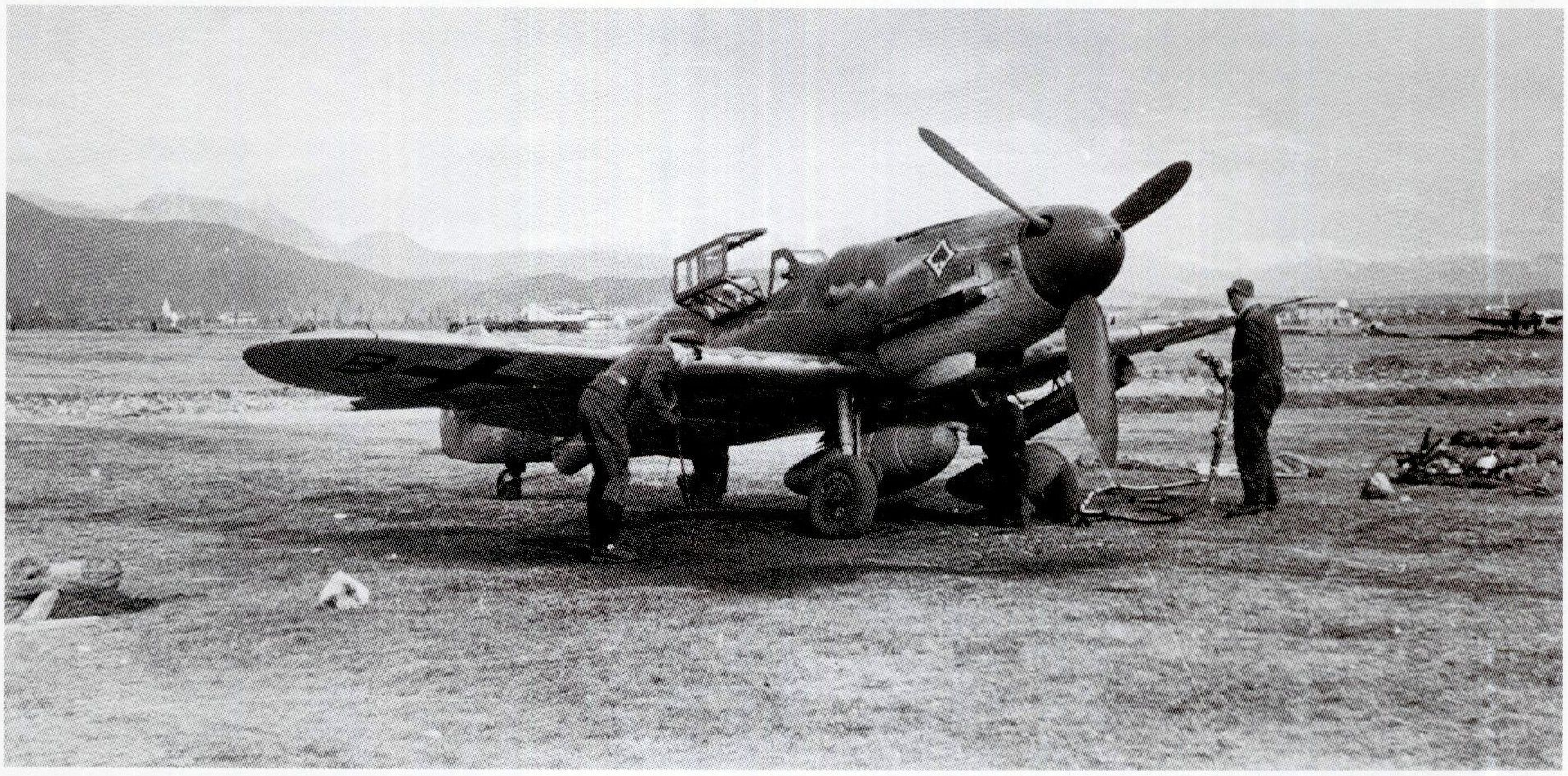
BELOW: Major Götz of III./JG 53 returns from a flight in early 1944. His Bf 109 G-6/R is still carrying a drop tank, suggesting that he had not seen action as it would have been jettisoned on contact with the enemy. Note the wavy demarcation line on the leading edge of the wings separating the upper and lower camouflage colours.





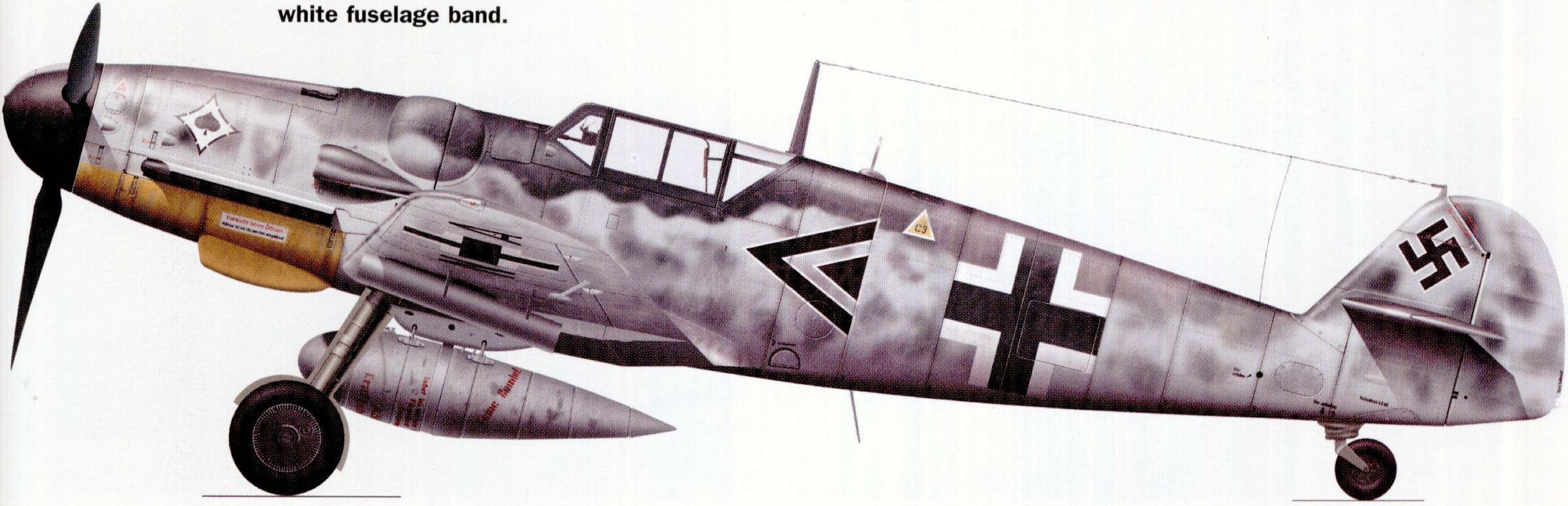
ABOVE: Hptm. Jürgen Harder in the cockpit of a Bf 109 G that had been specially modified to film the pilot in flight. The circular object in the corner of the windscreen marks the position of the desiccant cartridge which, on pressurised versions of the Bf 109, was positioned between the double panes of the windscreen and turned red when saturated with moisture. The filling had to be changed before every flight but, when saturated, could be dried in an oven and reused.

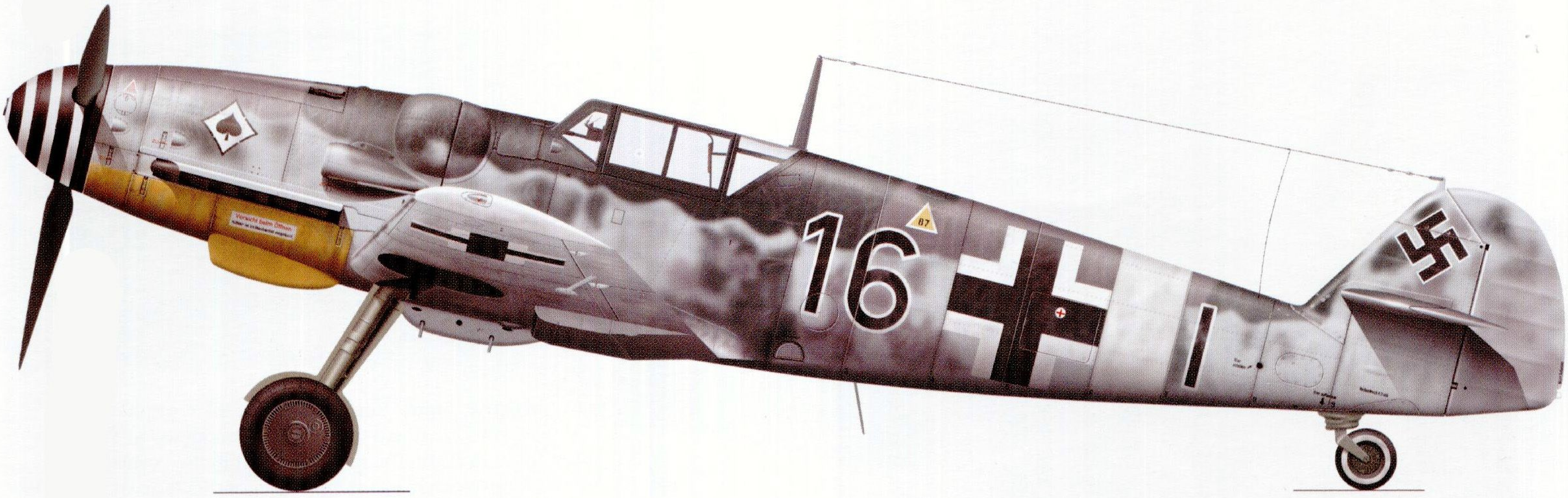
ABOVE AND RIGHT: Both these photographs are believed to have been taken on the airfield at Maniago, about 40 km west of Udine, at the foot of the Alps, in early 1944. The aircraft is a Bf 109 G-6 with the Stammkennzeichen BS+NA under the wings and the double chevron on the fuselage indicating that this machine was flown by Hptm. Jürgen Harder, the Gruppenkommandeur of I./JG 53. In the photograph, (*ABOVE*) Harder is watching armourers working on the underwing MG 151 cannon, possibly removing them, since the photograph (*RIGHT*) shows the aircraft has been fitted with 21 cm mortar tubes.



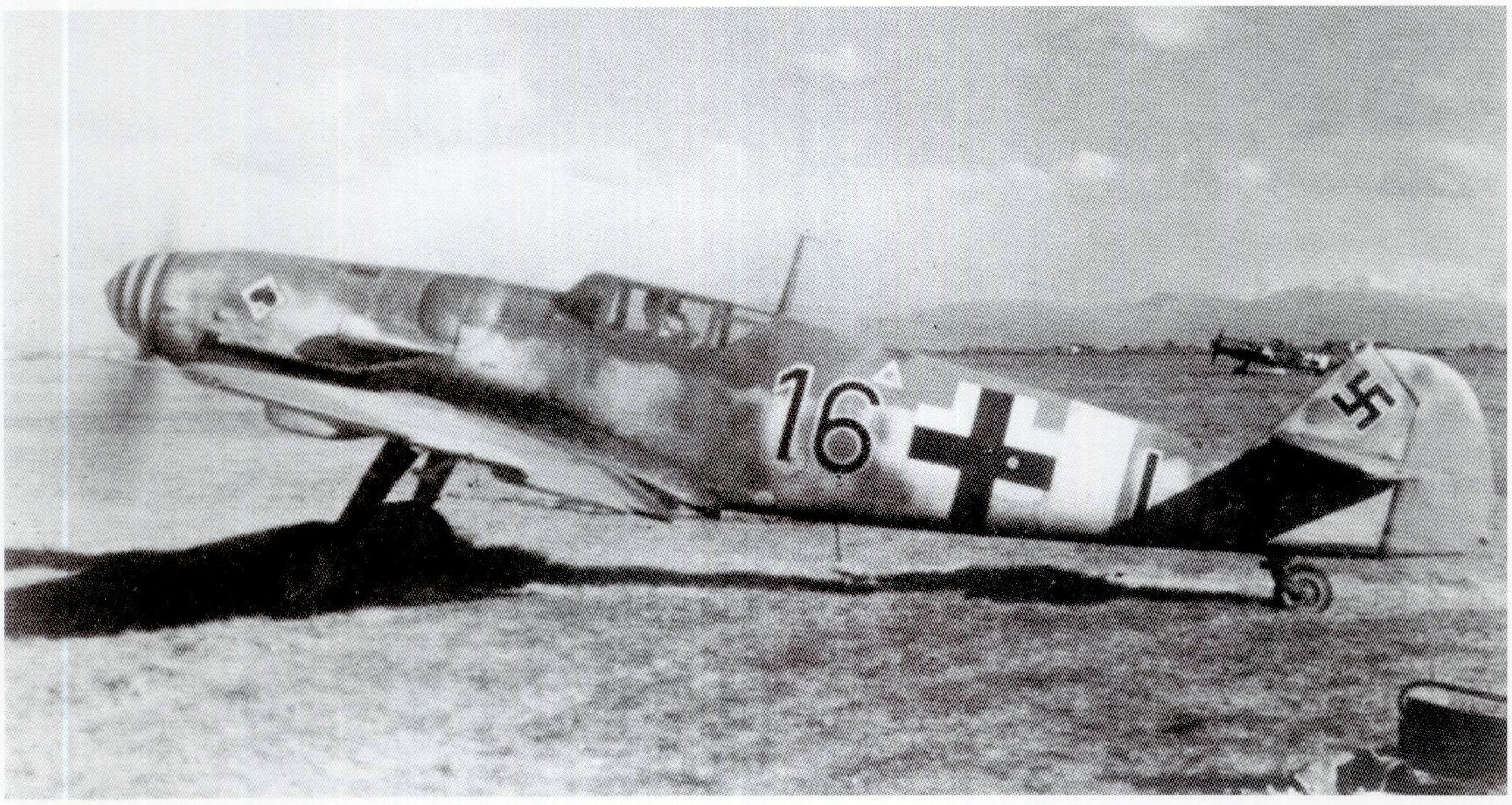
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 flown by Hptm. Jürgen Harder, Kommandeur of I./JG 53, early 1944

This would seem to be a fairly recently delivered machine as, although carrying appropriate Stab markings on the fuselage and the 'Pik As' badge of JG 53 on the nose, the aircraft still retains its Stammkennzeichen BS+NA under t wings and lacks the usual spiral design on the spinner. The camouflage is the standard RLM 74/75/76 scheme of th day fighters but, at least when the accompanying photographs were taken, the machine had no white wingtips nor a white fuselage band.

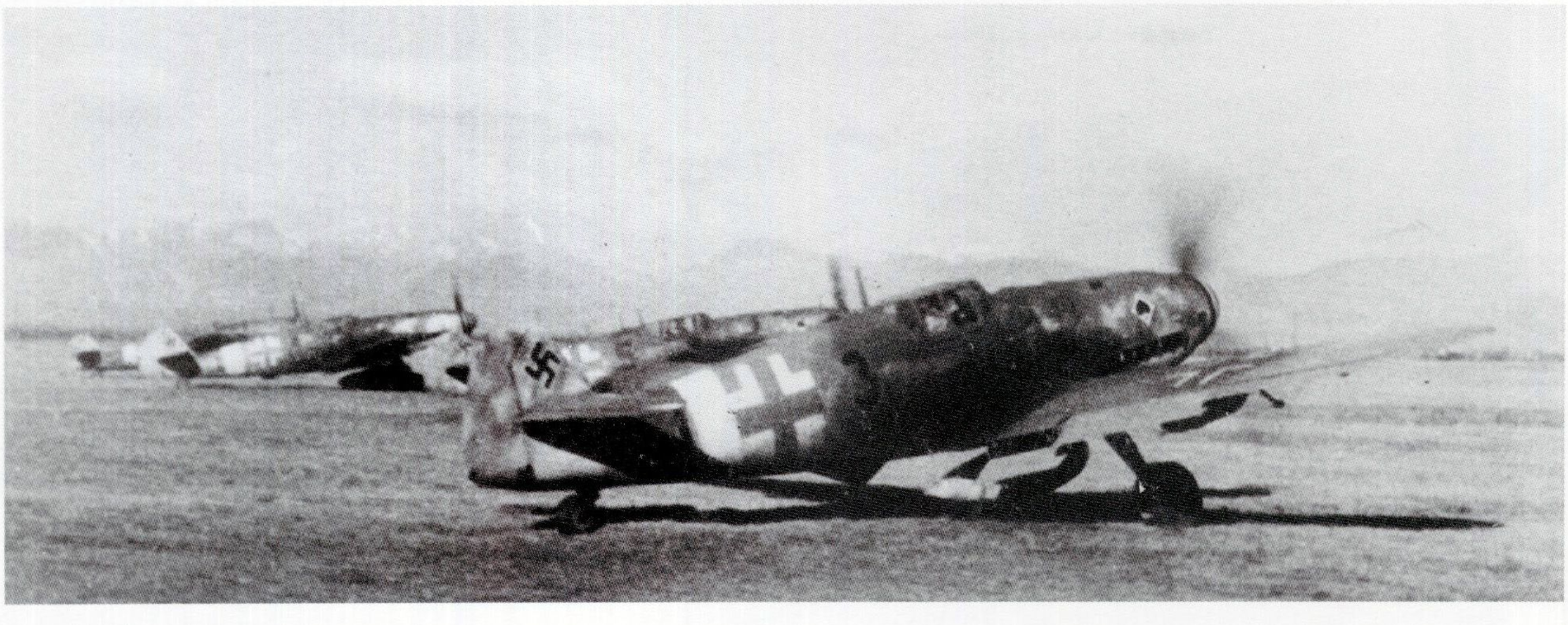




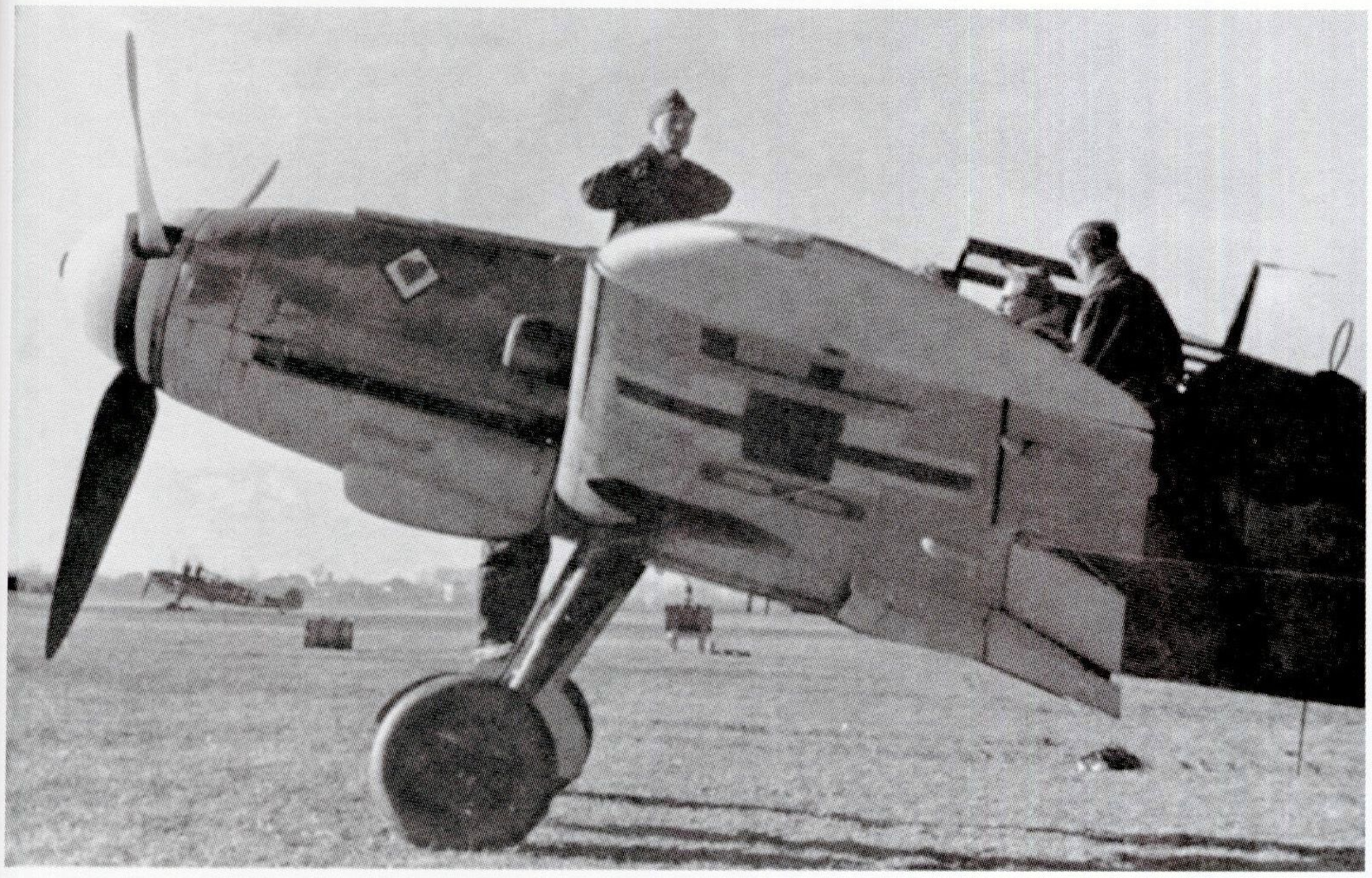
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Black 16' of III./JG 53, Anzio area, February 1944
This aircraft was undoubtedly finished in the standard RLM 74/75/76 fighter scheme of the period, with an undulating demarcation line between the upper and undersurface colours on the fuselage. Although believed to have been photographed in early 1944, this machine still has black centres to the fuselage Balkenkreuz, and carried unit and Gruppe markings in black, outlined white. This aircraft displays the increasingly popular, but still unofficial, spiral on the spinner, while the fuselage camouflage is a cross between large mottles and the striped, or banded, finish mentioned earlier.



LEFT: This Bf 109 G-6, 'Black 16' of III./JG 53, is believed to have been photographed in late January or early February 1944 when the Gruppe was flying freie Jagd missions in the Anzio and Cassino areas as well as providing escort for the ground-attack Fw 190s of SG 4. It will be noted that this aircraft is not fitted with mortar tubes, these having been finally removed following an incident on 16 January when the Gruppe intercepted a formation of bombers returning from an attack on a target in Southern Germany and lost five of its pilots.

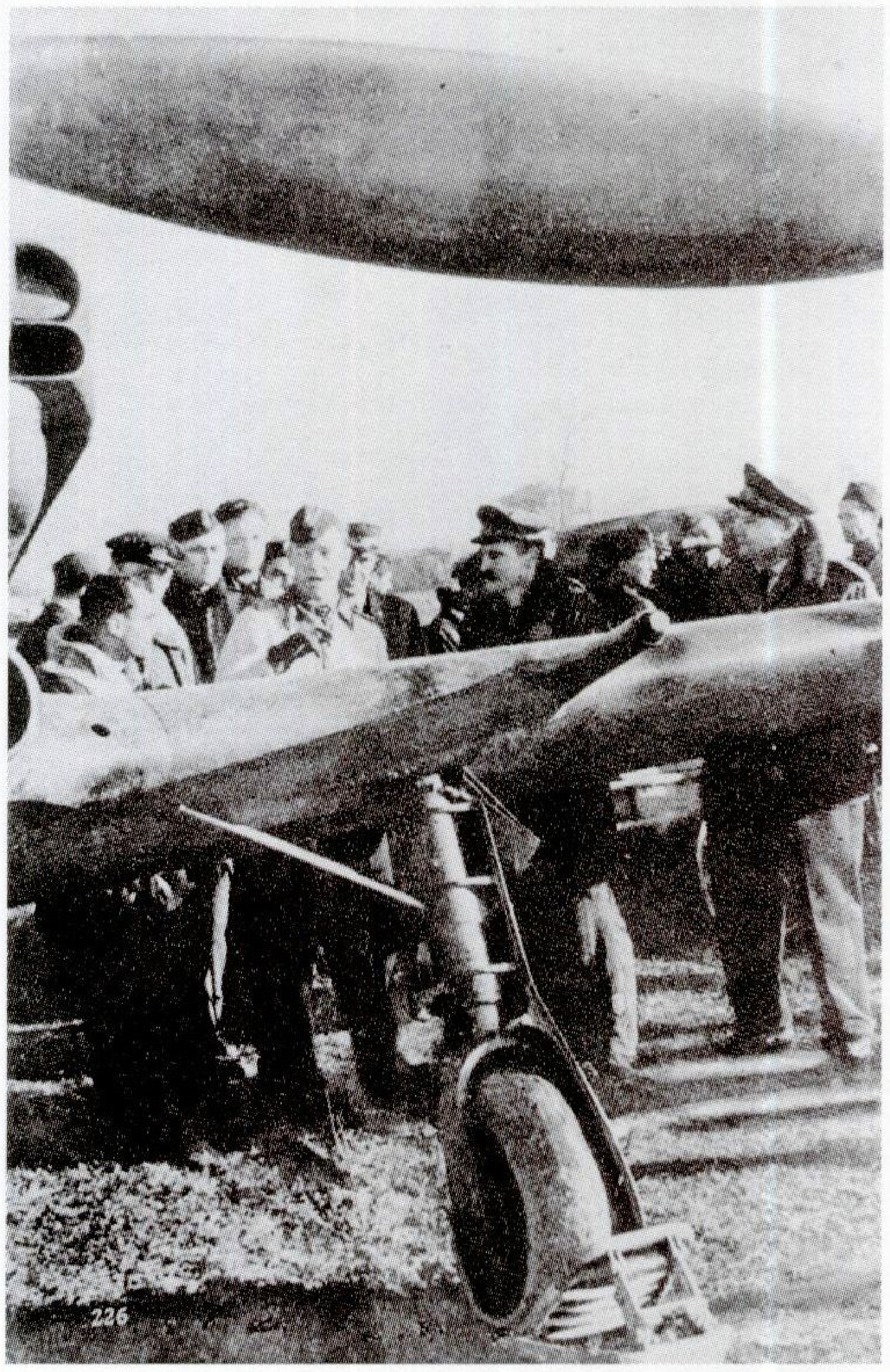


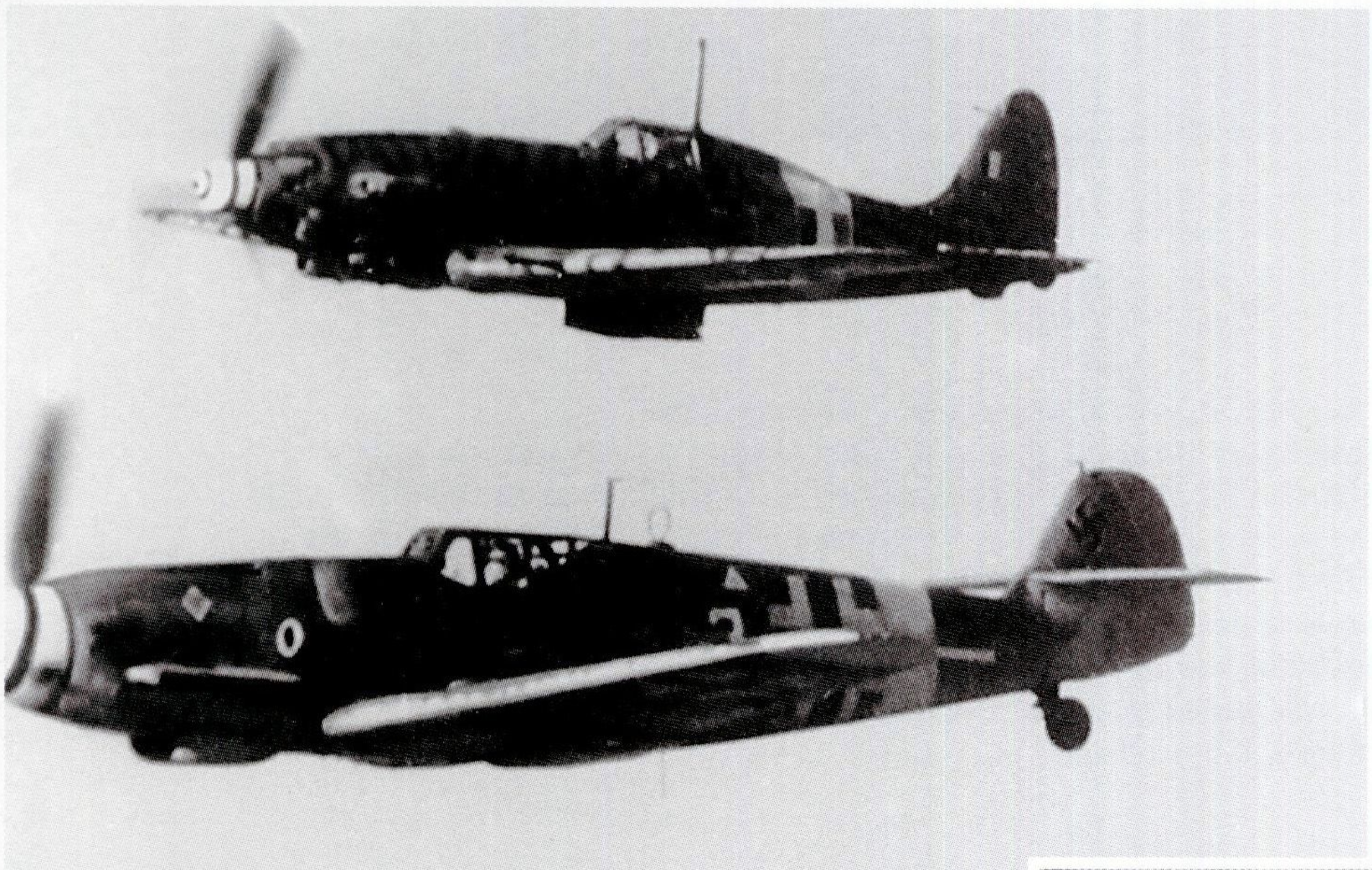
RIGHT: A Schwarm from 8./JG 53 taking off at the beginning of 1944 from Villaorba in north-east Italy. Nearest the camera is 'Black 3', a Bf 109 G-6/R6 'Kanonenboot' equipped with underwing MG 151 cannon.



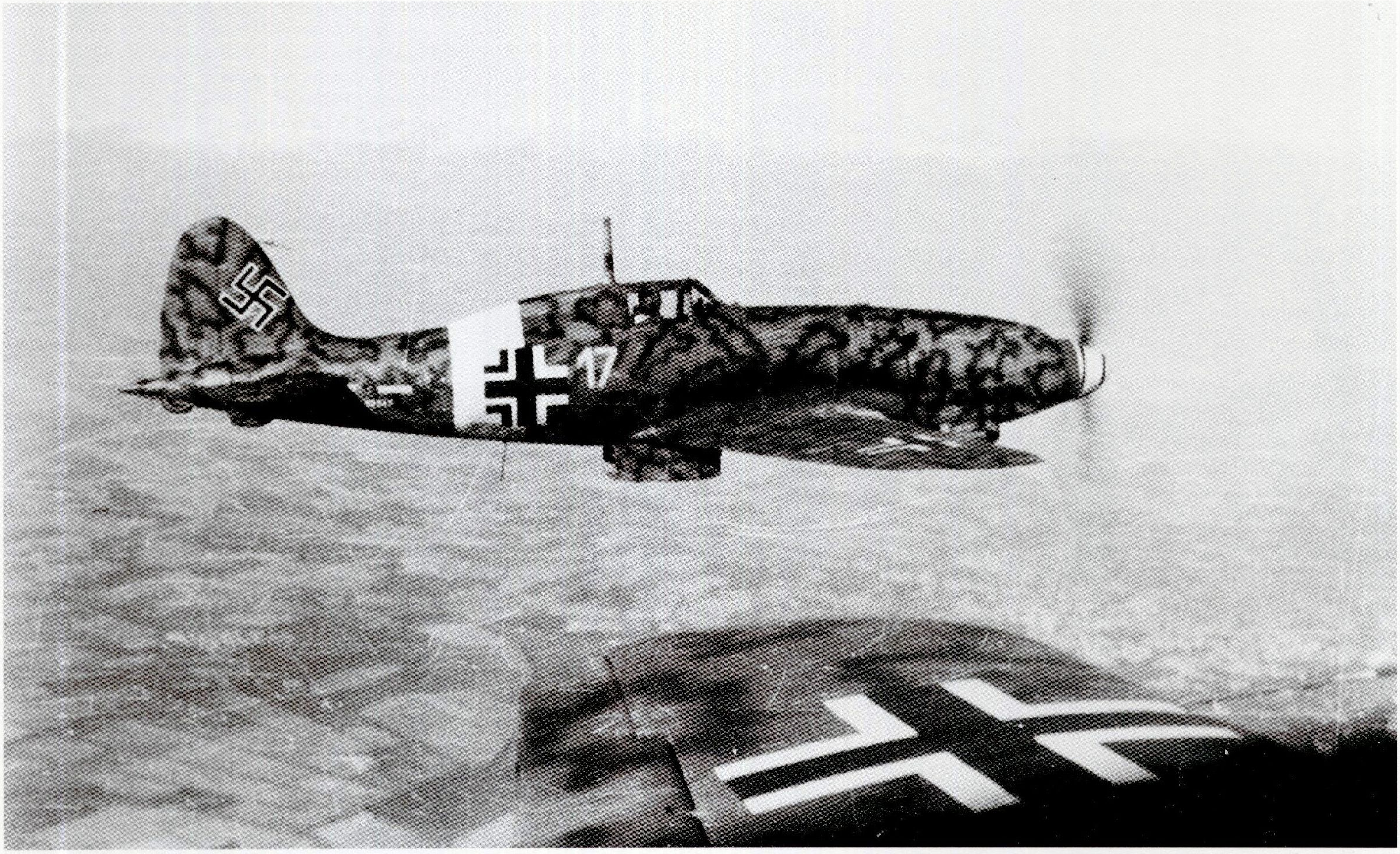
ABOVE: Due to the disappointing results achieved with the C.205, the aircraft of II./JG 77 were passed on to I° Gruppo Caccia of the ANR and the Gruppe re-equipped with the Bf 109 G-6 in December 1943. This Bf 109 G-6, 'White 11', is believed to have belonged to 4./JG 77 and was probably photographed at Lagnasco in January 1944. Clearly visible is the black spiral on a predominantly white spinner which was common to the Staffel at about this time, the white underside of the wingtip, and the Geschwader badge on the engine cowling.

BELOW: This photograph, first published in the German magazine 'Der Adler', shows Hptm. Siegfried Freytag with Italian pilots in early 1944. In order to train the pilots of the ANR and to familiarise them with German tactics, some Italian pilots were included in the ranks of Jagdgeschwader 77.





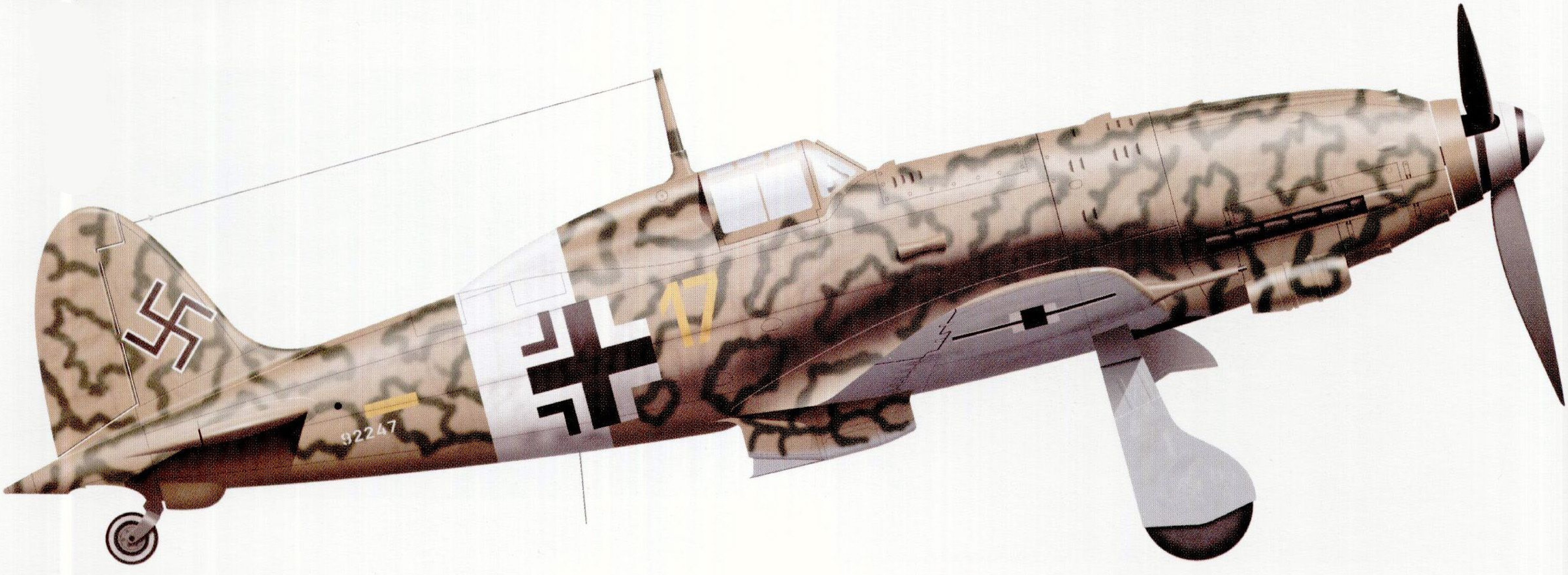
LEFT AND BELOW: Part of a series of photographs taken in early 1944 showing a Bf 109 G-6 from 4./JG 77 flying in formation with a C.205 'Yellow 1' of the I° Gruppo Caccia over the snow-covered Alps. Note the Italian national colours on the fuselage side and the stylised fasces, the insignia of the Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana, on the wings. It is believed that in March the C.205s were re-camouflaged in the standard Luftwaffe RLM 74/75/76 day-fighter scheme. Undoubtedly the photographs were taken to suggest that the German and Italian air forces were co-operating closely, and although joint missions were flown in the summer of 1944, there were problems with co-ordination and they were discontinued.

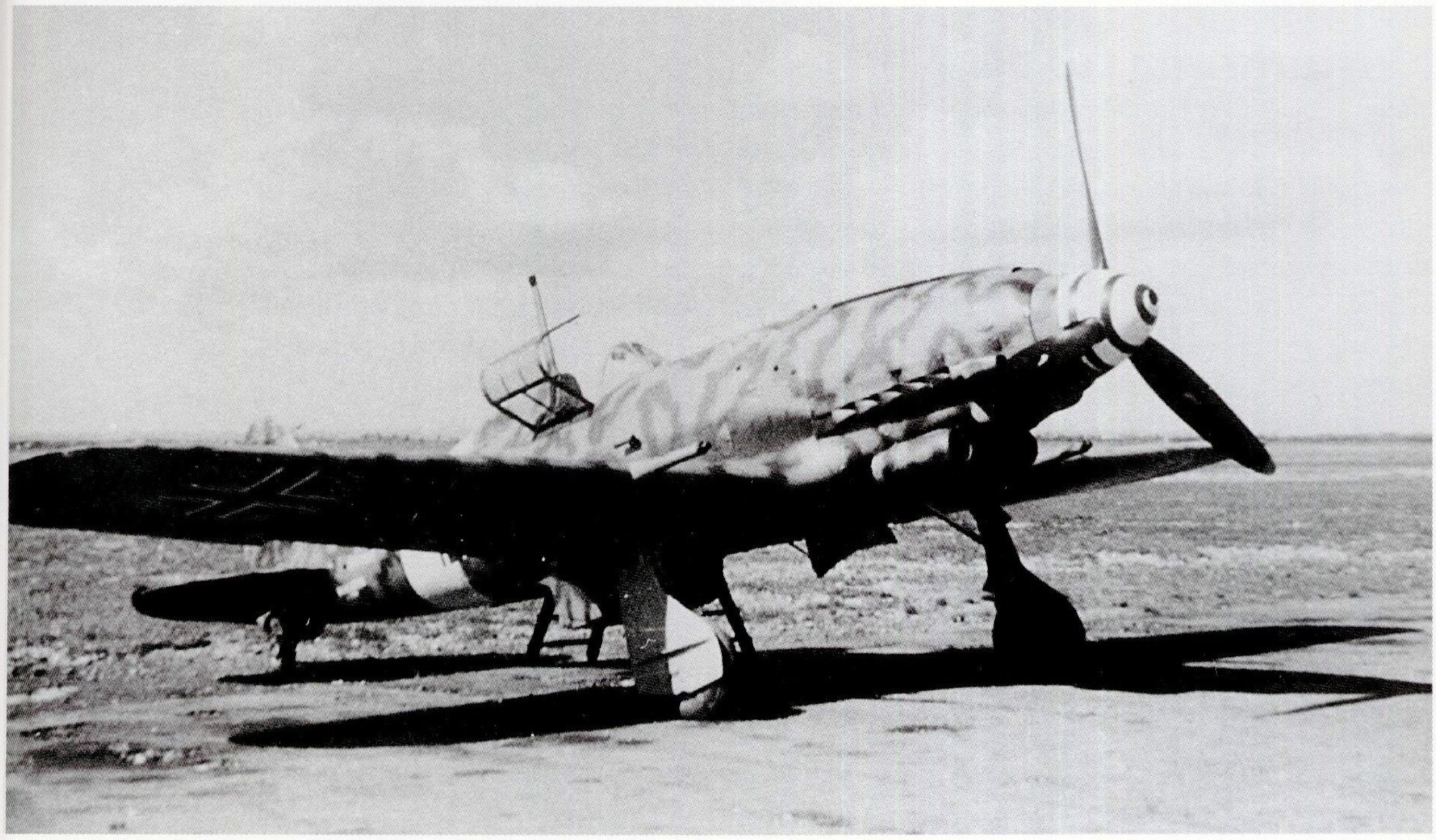


ABOVE: This photograph is believed to have been taken during a practice flight in January 1944, after the C.205s of II./JG 77 had been handed back to the Italians, and shows 'Yellow 17', formerly operational with 6./JG 77, still carrying its yellow Luftwaffe tactical number and II. Gruppe bar. Beneath the bar is the serial number MM.92247 in white.

Macchi C.205 'Yellow 17', MM.92247, of 6./JG 77, Northern Italy, January 1944

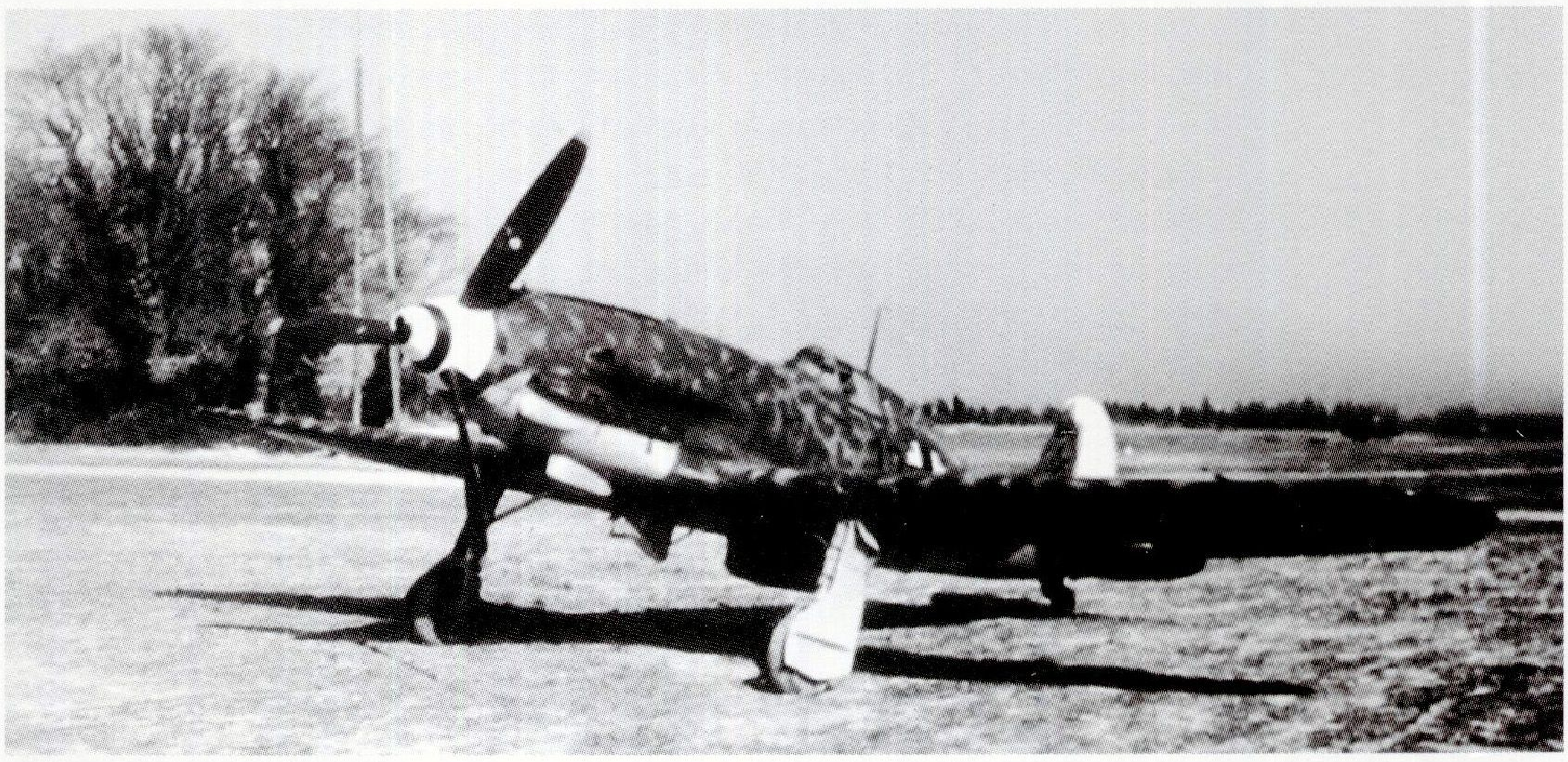
The uppersurface camouflage on this aircraft consisted of Nocciola Chiaro 4 (Light Walnut 4) oversprayed with irregular rings of Verde Oliva Scuro 2 (Dark Olive Green 2) while the undersurfaces were Grigio Azzurro Chiaro 1 (Light Blue Grey 1). Note that as the markings had been applied by the Italians before the aircraft was taken over by the Luftwaffe in September 1943, they are non-standard. While the Balkenkreuze on the wings were further outboard than was usual on German fighters, those on the fuselage sides have thick black segments to made them conspicuous against the white fuselage band and the Hakenkreuz on the tail was of unusual proportions. The spiral on the spinner was black on white, unlike on many Luftwaffe aircraft where this was applied in white over standard RLM 70, and the military serial MM.92247 appeared on the rear fuselage in white.

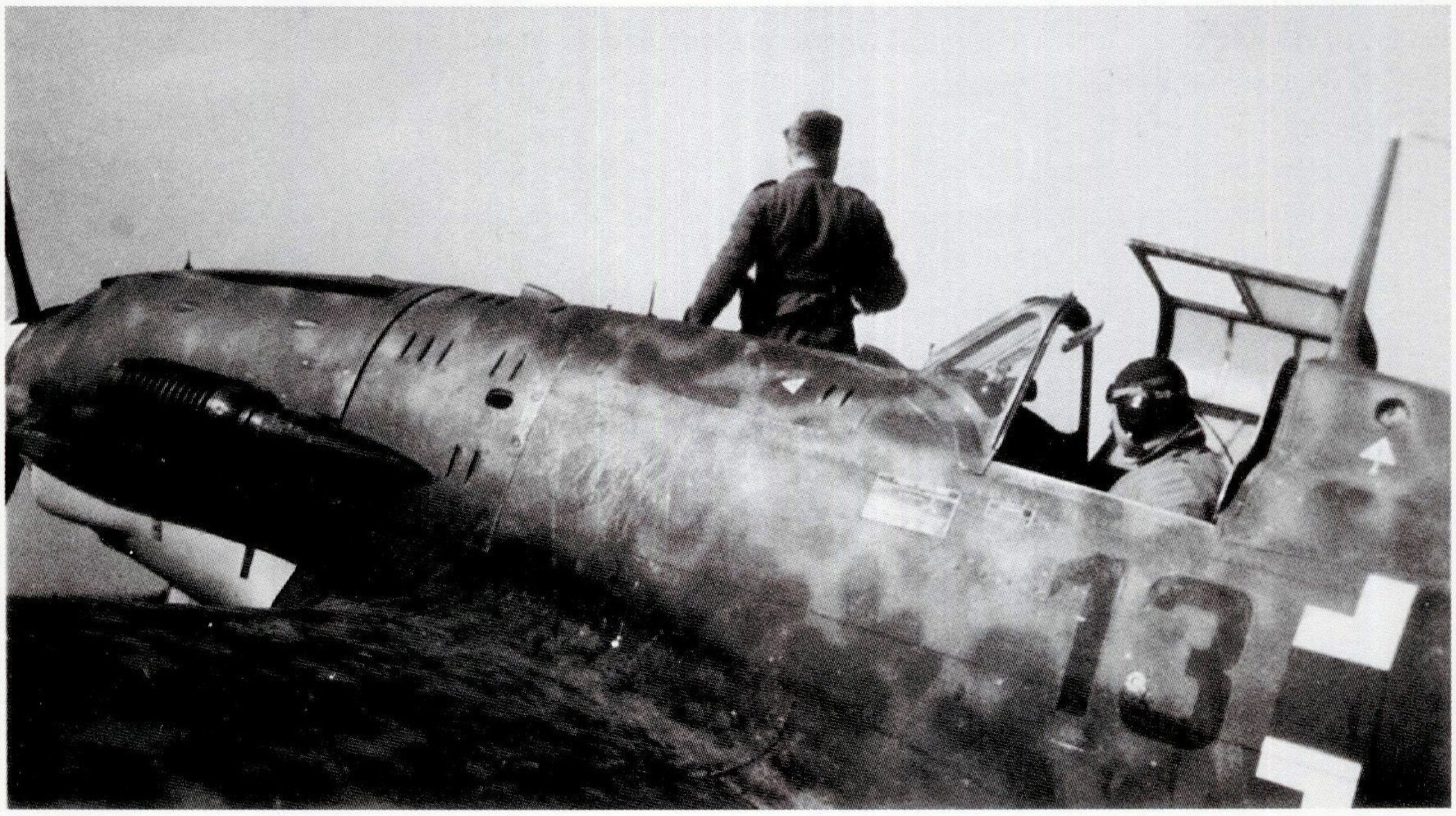




LEFT: The C.205 seen here was 'Yellow 1', MM.92212, and in Luftwaffe service was flown by Hptm. Hans-Joachim Deicke, the Staffelkapitän, of 6/JG 77. When this machine was handed back to the Italians it was eventually repainted in ANR markings and was assigned to Cap. Marco Marinone of I° Gruppo Caccia. The aircraft originally retained its Luftwaffe tactical number 'Yellow 1' but by January 1944 had been repainted with the ANR code 2-1.

RIGHT AND BELOW: At the time of the Italian armistice in September 1943, a final batch of Macchi C.202s was in production and this was completed for the Germans while other surviving machines were overhauled. Some of these aircraft were taken over by the Luftwaffe for pilot training and this machine, 'Black 13', was photographed at Orange in France in March 1944 where it was operated by JG 100. The camouflage is a late Regia Aeronautica scheme which had been applied by the Breda factory and consists of a dense mottle of Verde Oliva Scuro 2 (Dark Olive Green 2) over Nocciola Chiaro 4 (Light Walnut 4) uppersurfaces with Grigio Azzuro Scuro 1 (Light Blue Grey 1) undersurfaces. Note the yellow rudder and lower nose panel, these features being typical of training aircraft and machines taken over from other countries.





First Ritterkreuz for JG 4

In April, aerial activity over Northern Italy intensified and losses in this previously quiet area grew to match those on the Anzio and Cassino fronts south of Rome. The two *Jagdgruppen* in the region, I./JG 77 and I./JG 53, saw increased action and on 2 April both units were engaged over Ljubljana. Although these *Gruppen* achieved some success, four pilots were killed and, as the air battle took place over *Bandengebiet*, two of the pilots who baled out were captured by partisans. Fortunately for them, however, instead of being murdered, they were later exchanged for some of Tito's partisans. *Oblt.* Walter Seiz, the talented *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 53, also baled out in the same area but, despite being wounded, managed to evade search parties and succeeded in returning to his own lines.

On the 6th, *Hptm.* Armin Köhler, leader of 2./JG 77, claimed his 30th victory and on the 14th, *Oblt.* Franz Barten, *Kapitän* of 9./JG 53, shot down a P-47 as his 50th. On the 18th, *Fhj.Ofw.* Horst Schlick, a veteran of I.(*J*)/LG 2 and a pilot in 1./JG 77, gained his 30th victory, and the same day, *Oblt.* Franz Hrdlicka, the *Kapitän* of 5./JG 77, was credited with his 40th *Abschuss*. In total, JG 53 claimed 35 victories in April for the loss of 16 pilots, while JG 77 was credited with 30 *Luftsiege*, losing six pilots killed and one taken prisoner. Although these victories had no impact on the Allies, who could easily replace the losses, they were very difficult for the German pilots to achieve. For example, in Northern Italy on the 25th, *Stab* and I./JG 53 intercepted a US bomber formation, and although the *Kommodore*, *Major* Bennemann, shot down a B-17 near Bologna as his 90th victory, he was wounded by return fire and had to bale out. Another pilot forced to abandon his aircraft on the same day was *Hptm.* Harder, *Kommandeur* of I./JG 53. After destroying a bomber, his third victory in April, he collided with another, which crashed and was counted as his 50th victory; Harder baled out and landed unhurt.

By this time, the constant fighting had resulted in most German pilots being operationally tired so that, in addition to the dangers of combat, they risked making flying errors. On 12 April, *Uffz.* Heinz Gerber-Schulz of 4./JG 77 was killed near Viterbo when he collided with an Fw 190, apparently one of the aircraft from SG 4 which he was escorting. Another pilot involved in a similar accident which occurred on the 26th was Theo Lindemann, the *Kommandeur* of I./JG 77, who collided with his wingman, both pilots surviving with slight injuries. Regardless of the pilots' fatigue, the continued participation of the various fighter units still engaged in the air defence of Italy was of crucial importance and between them they possessed in mid-April a total of 126 serviceable aircraft distributed as follows:

Drago:	II./JG 77	(11)
Arlena:	III./JG 53	(10)
Ferrara:	I./JG 4	(16)
Reggio-Emilia:	II° *Gruppo Caccia*	(being formed)
Maniago:	I./JG 53	(30)
Lavariano:	I./JG 77	(32)
Udine:	Stab/JG 77	(2)
	I° *Gruppo Caccia*	(23)
Trecesimo:	*Stab*/JG 53	(2)

Added to this contingent was I./JG 2 which fought alongside JG 53 and JG 77 until around mid-April when the *Gruppe* returned to Aix-en-Provence. There, the growing number of USAAF attacks was still only being contested by the handful of instructors from JGr. *Süd* who had been formed into an *Einsatzstaffel*. On the 19th and 28th, EJG *Süd* claimed two victories each day but on the 29th they were supported by the returned I./JG 2 and five victories were claimed in the Toulon/Marseilles area.

Although ostensibly resting and refitting at Ferrara in Italy, I./JG 4 was nevertheless involved in some battles in April, during which month its pilots shot down six enemy aircraft, including four P-38s on the 25th, but again, two pilots were killed and six wounded. One piece of good news that month, which probably helped raise morale, was an announcement on 6 April that *Hptm.* Walter Hoeckner, the *Kommandeur*, had been awarded the *Ritterkreuz*. This was the first such decoration to be awarded to the *Gruppe* and was in recognition of Hoeckner's 65 victories.

Also still operating in Italy were the *Schlachtflieger* of SG 4. As well as providing air-support, albeit only limited, for the hard-pressed ground troops, pilots of this unit also claimed some aerial victories, the pilots of 1./SG 4 being particularly successful. On 7 April, for example, four pilots from this *Staffel* were credited with shooting down a total of five P-40s of 112 Sqn. near Rieti airfield and maintained an average of two victories per month. It should be emphasised, however, that the unit's prime task was ground support and the pilots did not at this time actively seek air combat. Such aerial victories therefore resulted when, as had happened on the 7th, the pilots were attacked and had to defend themselves, although the experience would nevertheless prove valuable in the following weeks.

At Nisch, II./JG 51 was again being led by *Hptm.* Karl Rammelt and was operating mainly over Rumania to protect the Ploesti oilfields from numerous attacks by US bombers. Elsewhere, the reinforced 7./JG 27 was split up to operate from Kalamaki, Rhodes and Crete, one of the two pilots wounded that month being *Uffz.* Theo Heckmann, a veteran of the *Staffel*, who had been credited with about seven victories. He landed at Maleme on Crete on 19 April just as Allied bombers attacked the airfield and was seriously wounded by bomb splinters. The only result of the numerous maritime patrols flown by this *Staffel* was a single Beaufighter shot down over the Aegean.

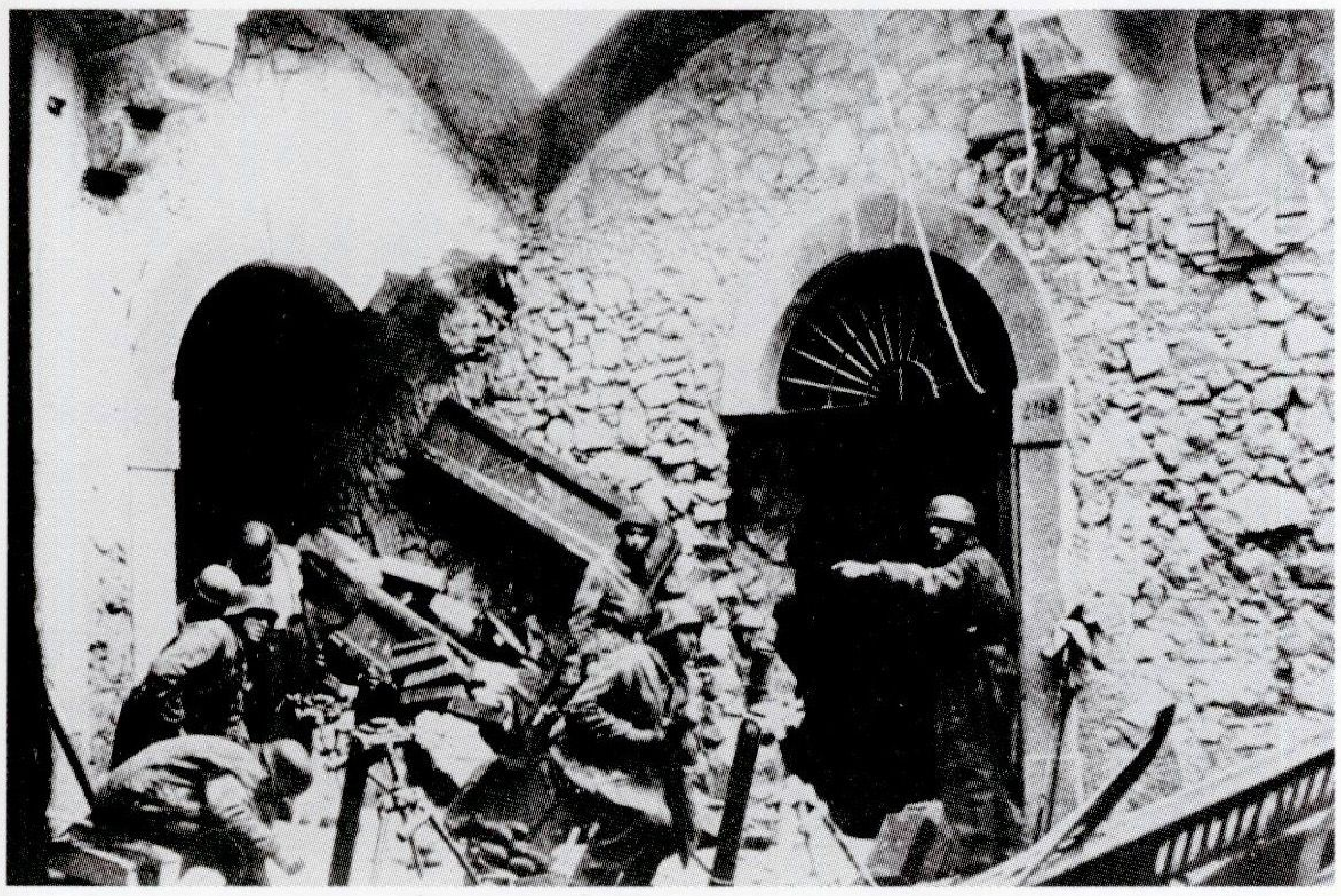
On 9 May, I./JG 53 was transferred to Targsorul Nou in Rumania where it was to support III./JG 77 in the battles against the large formations of US bombers which were attacking the oil refineries. With this move and with II./JG 53 having already departed, the only part of the *'Pik As' Geschwader* which remained in Italy was III./JG 53 which was dispersed near the front in central Italy.

Paradoxically, with only three pilots lost in four weeks of operating over the main battle lines in central Italy, III./JG 53 had fewer casualties than the *Gruppen* operating in the north where, on the 1st, the *Stab* and I./JG 77 had moved to Ferrara in Northern Italy, replacing I./JG 4. Although based further from the front lines, I. and II./JG 77 were heavily committed to intercepting Allied bomber forces which flew northwards from Foggia to attack targets in Austria and Germany. On 10 May, I./JG 77 was involved in a battle with US bombers and their escort over Yugoslavia, during which the *Kommodore*, *Obstlt.* Steinhoff, was obliged to make a forced landing in German-held territory after shooting down a P-38. Perhaps more noteworthy, however, is that while this was the experienced Steinhoff's 167th victory, the only other successes were claimed by four relatively inexperienced pilots of I./JG 77, three of whom had no previous victories but between them claimed two P-38s and one B-24 destroyed. For the fourth pilot, who forced a B-24 out of formation, it was only his second victory. All told, I. and II./JG 77 made 41 claims in May but the two *Gruppen* lost a total of 15 pilots.

ABOVE: Obstlt. Johannes Steinhoff became Kommodore of JG 77 in North Africa on 1 March 1943 and led the Geschwader throughout the battle for Sicily and Italy until 1 December 1944.

Following the opening of the final Allied offensive against Cassino on 11 May, III./JG 53 flew *freie Jagd* sorties and provided escort for the *Jabos* of SG 4. Then, on the 23rd, the front at Anzio erupted when the reinforced US VI Corps finally broke out of the beachhead and, in a move which had more propaganda than strategic value, advanced towards Rome. Nevertheless, every fighter was needed to operate over the front lines, mainly flying escort for the *Jabos*. Earlier, I./JG 4 had transferred from the relatively quiet airfield at Ferrara to Fabrica di Roma for operations over the front lines but on the 7th, 2./JG 4 was surprised by Allied fighters near Lake Bracciano, losing four pilots killed, among which was the *Staffelführer, Lt.* Reinhold Schmetzer, who had been credited with some 33 victories. After these losses, the *Staffel* was sent to Bergamo to recuperate. The *Gruppe's* total losses in May were five men killed and five wounded but although it claimed 16 victories, the Allies could easily replace their losses while the *Luftwaffe* could not.

At the same time, I./JG 77, then in the north, was rushed to the front line in central Italy to counter the overwhelming forces engaged in the Allied offensives and provide escort for the hard-worked Fw 190s of SG 4 which, it may be noted, had largely remained on the front lines throughout and, unlike the fighter units, had not enjoyed any long-term break from operations to rest or refit.



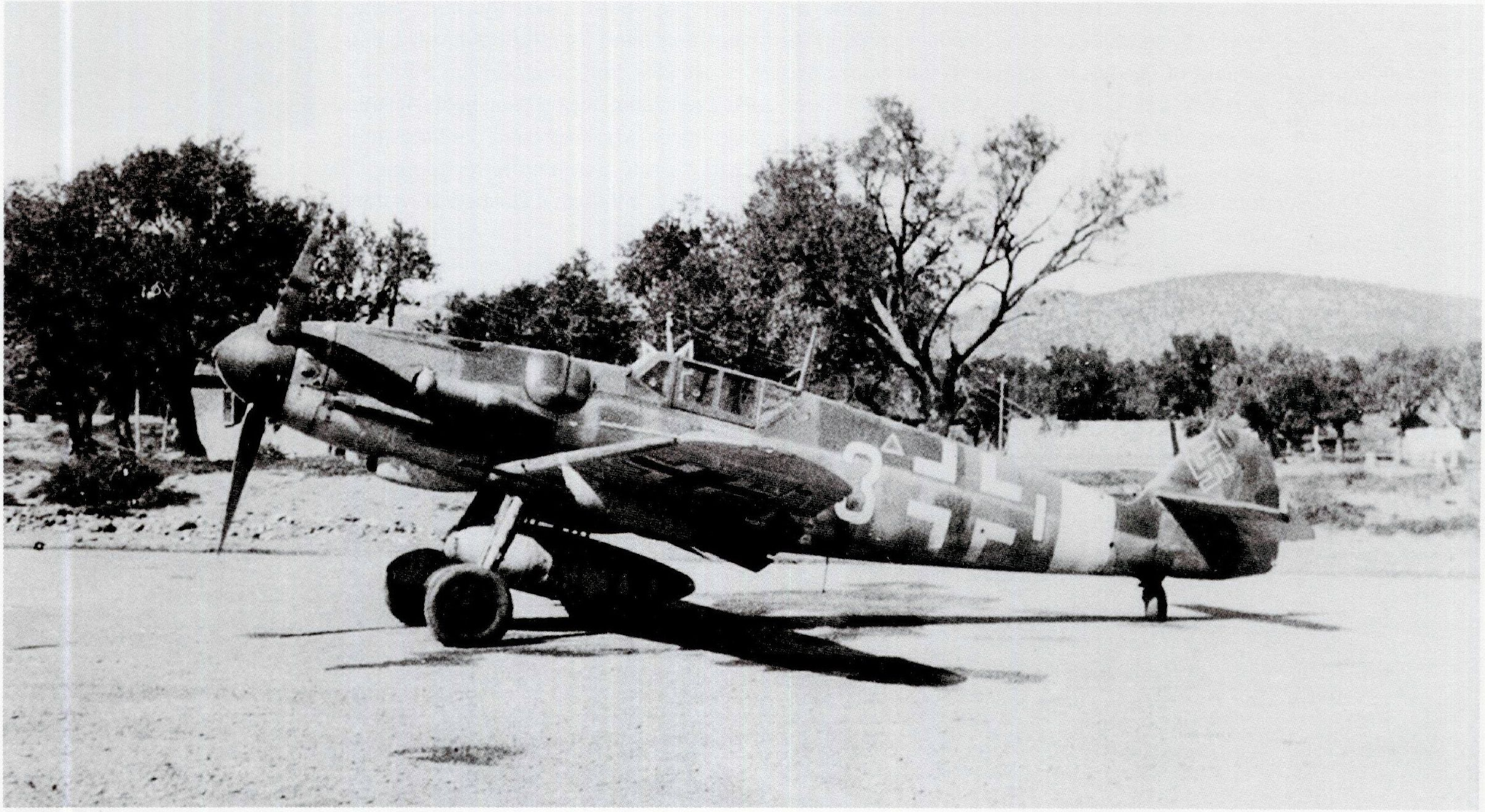
BELOW: Although the town of Cassino and its adjacent Benedictine monastery were subjected to intense artillery and aerial bombardment – unprecedented for a target of comparable size – the remains of the shattered buildings made excellent defensive positions and the Allies had to fight for every street. Here German infantry, supported by Fallschirmjäger, are firing mortars from the ruins. Not until 18 May, following a final bombardment by 2,000 artillery pieces combined with a ground assault, were the town and monastery in Allied hands.

Elsewhere, 7./JG 27 continued to operate over the Aegean although occasional sorties were made westwards. On the 14th, pilots of this *Staffel* intercepted near Brindisi a formation of Cant Z.1007s of the new *Aeronautica Militare Italiana* which consisted of Italian personnel who fought alongside the Allies after the Armistice of 1943. These aircraft had taken off from Lecce and flown over the Adriatic to drop weapons and supplies to Tito's partisans. On their return flight, nine of the twelve unescorted floatplanes were attacked, the German pilots claiming six as destroyed. In fact, five Cants were lost but two others returned to their base heavily damaged and with casualties on board. The Italians claimed to have shot down four German fighters, whereas only one was lost.

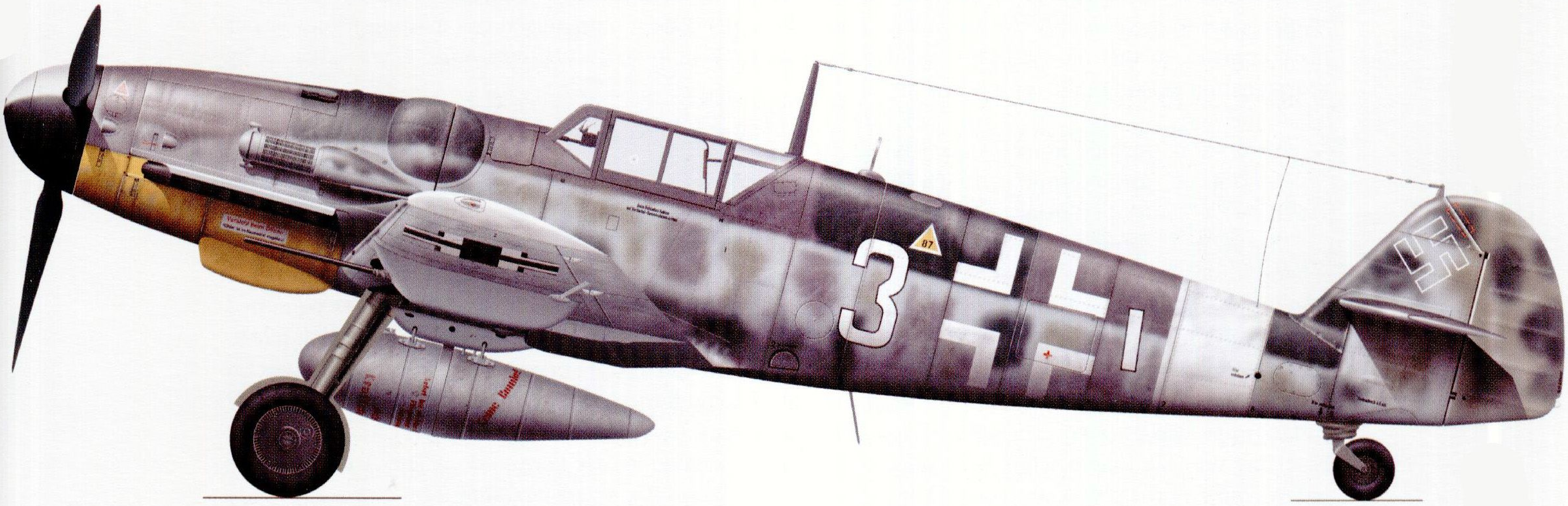
In France, I./JG 2 had left the Mediterranean theatre and returned to the Paris area for operations in the West, while most training units in the south were evacuated to areas in Germany or Hungary in order to be safe from the increasing numbers of Allied aircraft. However, some of the instructors remained behind and, together with instructors from the *Einsatzstaffel* of JGr. *Süd*, formed *Jagdgruppe* 200 for the defence of Provence and the Côte d'Azur. Some of these instructors were pilots of considerable experience and included *Oblt.* Georg Seckel, *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JGr. 200, with approximately 38 victories, who had been flying since 1936, had been the *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 77 in 1943 and had been awarded the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold*. Another instructor formerly with III./JG 77 who also remained with JGr. 200 was *Ofw.* Eduard Isken, a holder of the *Deutsches Kreuz* then credited with about 40 victories. In its first month of operations, the pilots of JGr. 200 claimed ten *Luftsiege*, one of which was a Mosquito shot down on the 13th by *Ogfr.* Horst Rippert.

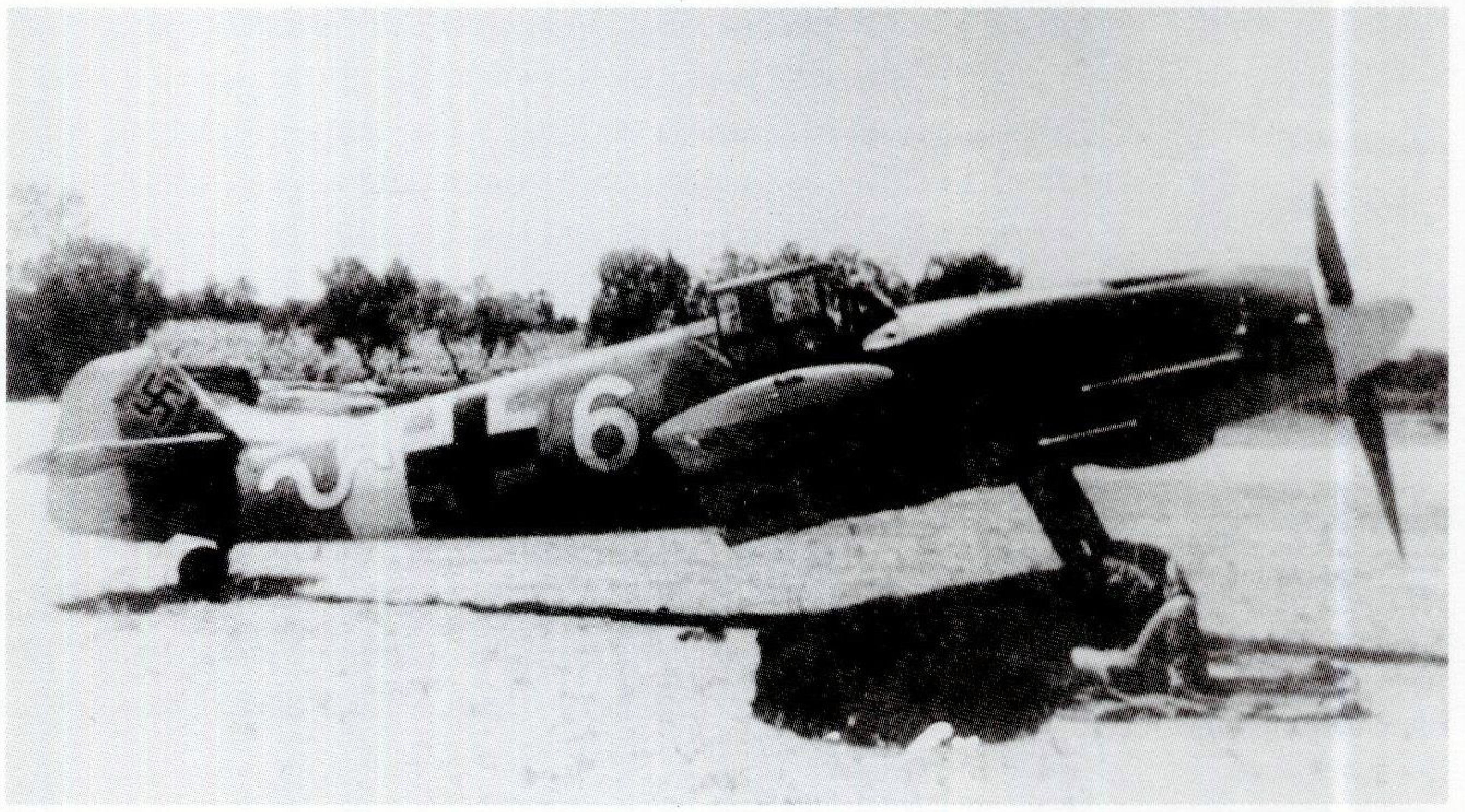
Despite the renewed Allied offensives in Italy, this theatre was now considered by the German high command to be only of secondary importance and on the 30th, although the German fighter force in Italy had already been weakened by the withdrawal of units to serve in the West, I. and II./JG 77 were each ordered to send 16 pilots and 94 ground personnel to Germany to create new *Staffeln* for Home Defence. To offset the siphoning-off of the *Luftwaffe* fighter forces, the Italian fighter squadrons were becoming more aggressive and made a number of claims, while the pilots of SG 4 now flew more sorties in the fighter role, during which they performed very well, claiming at least 15 victories in May, almost as many as claimed by JG 53.

BELOW AND FIRST RIGHT: This Bf 109 G-6, 'White 3', was equipped with underwing MG 151 cannon and had a loop aerial behind the tall radio mast. It is believed to have been photographed at Maleme or Kastelli in Crete in April 1944 when 7./JG 27 was engaged in protecting shipping in the Aegean from attack by Allied aircraft. In order to increase its range, the aircraft has been fitted with an auxilliary fuel tank beneath the fuselage and the pilot, Uffz. Franz Stadler, is seen (*RIGHT*) on the wing of his machine. Stadler, an Austrian, began the war in a Flak unit attached to 2.(H)/13 and took part in Operation 'Barbarossa' before being trained as a pilot. He was then posted to 7./JG 27 in late 1943 and claimed his first victory 30 km north of Brindisi on 14 May 1944. He continued to fly over the Aegean with this Staffel until it was relieved in June by II./JG 51. Stadler then transferred to 5./JG 51 and remained in that Staffel until the end of the war. In the 1950s he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion.

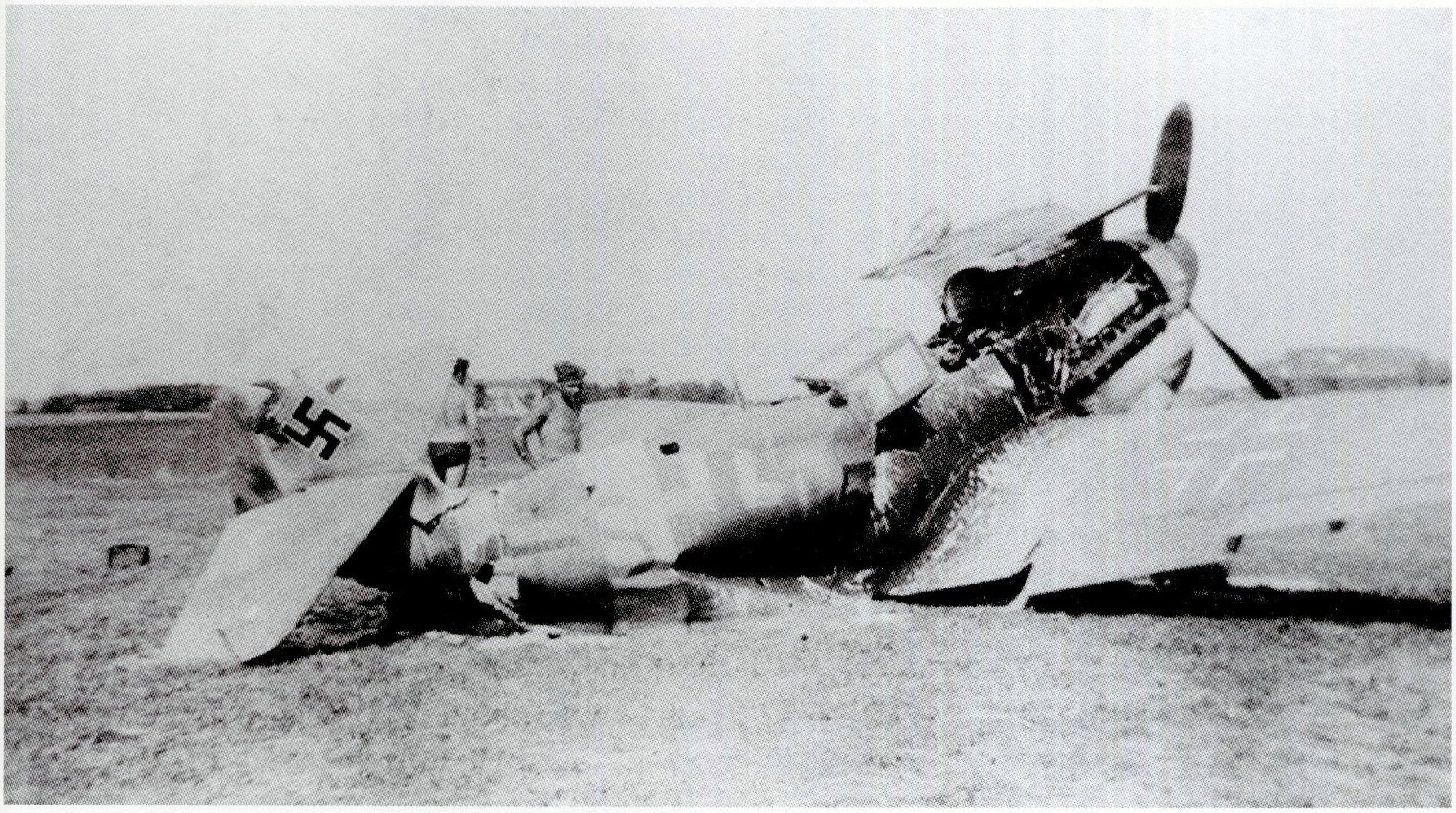


Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'White 3' flown by Uffz. Franz Stadler of 7./JG 27, Crete, April 1944
Uffz. Stadler's 'White 3' was finished in standard RLM 74/75/76 camouflage colours. On the fuselage, the RLM 74 and 75 mottles were separated with additional patches of RLM 02 and were unusually large. Note the Gruppe bar, which is angled slightly forward, the stencilling under the cockpit and that the Hakenkreuz and the fuselage Balkenkreuz are in a white outline style. The spinner had a one third white segment and at the time the machine was photographed, the gun camera port on the left wing had been capped off.





ABOVE: Another aircraft operated by 7./JG 27 in Crete was this 'White 6', pictured here at Maleme.



LEFT: The remains of the Bf 109 G-6 flown by Uffz. Rudolf Holz of 5./JG 77 after a landing accident at Ferrara in May 1944. Holz, who had joined his Staffel in March 1944, was unhurt in this incident but was shot down and injured during an air battle over Tramonti on 9 June. He later returned to JG 77 and flew with I. Gruppe. Holz survived the war.

Schlachtgeschwader 4 in Italy

Up until 18 October 1943, control of the *Luftwaffe's* dive-bomber, ground-attack, anti-tank and night harassment units, was split between the *General der Kampfflieger* and the *General de Jagdflieger*, generally with unsatisfactory results. With the growing importance of the ground-attack role, it was realised that it was desirable to unite all the various ground-attack units under the command of a new *Waffengeneral*, the *General der Schlachtflieger*, who immediately reorganised the existing forces under his command. In this reorganisation, a new ground-attack unit, *Schlachtgeschwader 4*, was created by redesignating existing units as follows:

Stab/SG 4	formed from	*Stab*/Sch.G 2
I./SG 4	formed from	II./Sch.G 2 (less 8. *Staffel*)
II./SG 4	formed from	II./SKG 10
III./SG 4	formed from	III./SKG 10.

The formation of SG 4 in this way was advantageous in that it resulted in a single *Geschwader* equipped solely with the Fw 190 and in which were some of the *Luftwaffe's* most experienced ground-attack pilots. The *Geschwaderkommodore* was *Major* Georg Dörffel who had already been awarded the Oak Leaves for his valuable work in providing close air support to the ground forces in Russia. Similarly, the *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe* was *Major* Werner Dörnbrack who had earned his *Ritterkreuz* in 1941 and, as well as later receiving the Oak Leaves while with SG 4, subsequently became its last *Kommodore*. The II. *Gruppe* was led by *Hptm*. Gerhard Walther who had been awarded the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold* for his earlier successes when flying with a *Zerstörergeschwader*. The III. *Gruppe*, which transferred to Beaumont-sur-Oise in France in November 1943, was led by *Major* Werner Dedikind who, at the end of November was awarded the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold* on account of his earlier successes while with II./SKG 10.

The Fw 190 performed well in the ground-attack role. It had a good speed, a good armament with a rapid rate of fire and, in addition to an ample supply of ammunition, it could carry a relatively large bomb load. Because of its air-cooled engine, the aircraft was not particularly sensitive to hits from ground fire and its robust construction permitted high diving speeds while allowing the machine to operate from poor landing strips.

At the beginning of 1943, the Fw 190 had still been able to hold its own in the Mediterranean and the enemy, who chiefly used Spitfires, treated the Fw 190 with a certain respect. It was therefore possible for SKG 10 to carry out many operations and achieve very good results, but with the gradual increase in the number of enemy fighters, the air situation changed from mid-1943 and, as with the *Luftwaffe's* fighter units, the bombing of airfields during the Allied preparations for the invasion of Sicily destroyed many aircraft on the ground while bomb splinters on the landing strips punctured tyres and resulted in further losses during take-offs and landings. During the battle for Sicily, the Fw 190s mainly attacked Allied invasion shipping although operations were also flown against land targets but under conditions of increasing Allied superiority.

With the loss of Sicily the Fw 190s were withdrawn to mainland Italy where, in October, the ground-attack units were combined to form SG 4. However, after a few weeks of operations, during which I. and II./SG 4 were escorted by the fighters of JG 53 and JG 77, battle attrition had so reduced the strength of I. *Gruppe* that by 20 December, only a single, non-operational Fw 190 G-3 remained and by the end of the month I./SG 4 had been withdrawn to Piacenza to rest. The *Gruppe* returned to the front in mid-January 1944 and, together with II./SG 4, was soon back in action following the Allied Anzio-Nettuno landings which took place on 22 January 1944. Both *Gruppen* were again heavily committed, sometimes flying several sorties a day from their base at Viterbo to attack the Allied ground forces as well as ships of the invasion fleet. Operations were also flown over the front line around Cassino, but because of the enemy's aerial superiority, these could again only be carried out with a strong fighter escort, usually provided by the Bf 109 Gs of II./JG 77, and ideally with a ratio of three fighters for every ground-attack aircraft.

Although the two *Gruppen* were careful to use airfields about 150 km away from the front, concealment was nevertheless of particular importance and it was necessary to maintain a series of very strict measures in order to avoid losses on the ground. Paramount among these was the need to camouflage the airfields themselves, as well as the aircraft, and the aim was to disperse everything as widely as possible with the aircraft concealed in dispersals where a supply of bombs, ammunition and fuel sufficient for a full day's operations was maintained. Vehicles did not therefore have to move on the airfield in daylight, replenishment arriving at night from dumps at different locations several kilometres away. Fuel was stored in drums near the aircraft and refuelling was carried out by means of hand-pumps.

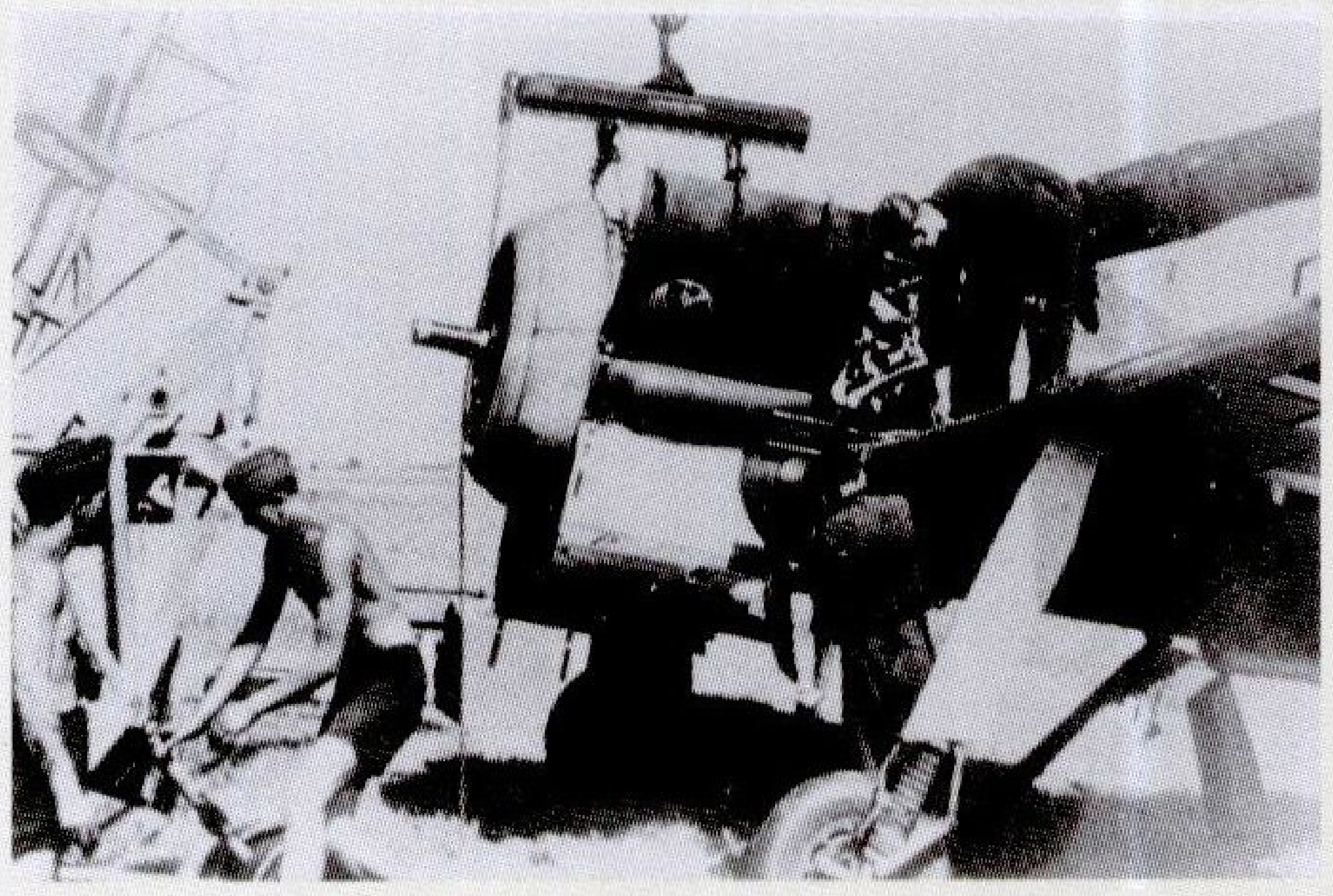
The unit was already operating in hilly countryside well covered with trees and

BELOW: A US transport column in the Cassino area after an attack by SG 4. Halfway down the road, medical personnel are attending to casualties, while another target burns in the distance.

bushes which provided excellent cover, and airfields were selected where there were also several small meadows for use as runways, their length being just sufficient to permit flying operations. Between sorties, cattle were often allowed to graze on the runways and the aircraft were well camouflaged and hidden. Although the positioning and removal of branches and camouflage nets imposed a higher workload on the ground staff and extra communications were required in order to link the various dispersal points to a central control, these measures proved very effective. Sometimes, a dummy airfield was set up nearby with wrecked aircraft and equipment parked as decoys while the ground was deeply rutted to simulate regular use. These decoys were frequently attacked so that losses in men and aircraft on the real airfields were negligible. Evidence concerning the extent to which the unit went to protect its bases and equipment is provided in an Allied Technical Intelligence report which mentions that a number of dummy Fw 190s had been found close to one airfield used by SG 4. These had been carefully constructed from wood and canvas and featured full SG 4 camouflage and markings complete with white fuselage band.

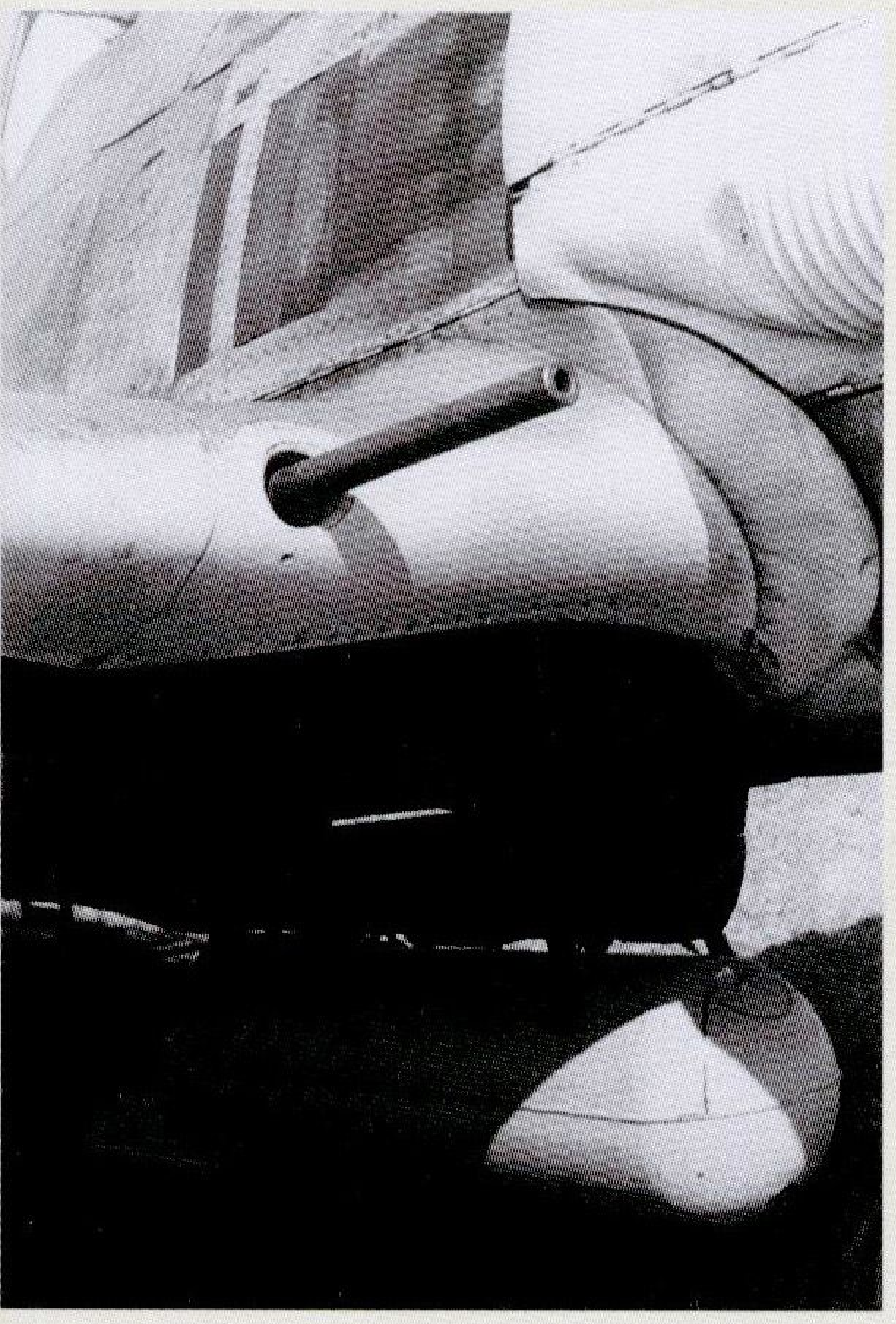
While remote airfields in the countryside were preferred, the range of the Fw 190s relative to the target often meant that when there were no other possibilities, SG 4 had to operate from airfields with concrete runways. On most of these airfields, the runways and taxi tracks had been cratered by Allied bombing and to avoid revealing the presence of the unit, only those craters necessary to restore a small section of runway were filled in. Aircraft were parked inside ruined buildings and hangars and the men and equipment accommodated under canvas or in nearby villages so that, when viewed from above, the airfield appeared disused and completely deserted.

Apart from safe dispersal sites, it was equally important to ensure that the aircraft themselves were camouflaged in appropriate colours. According to Werner Dörnbrack, a former *Kommodore*, the finish on the unit's aircraft was therefore changed according to the seasons and the area of operations, with a green, brown and yellow finish predominating. Nevertheless, the need for speed in the air was as important as concealment on the ground and it was discovered that an increase of some 10 to 20 kph was possible if the aircraft were polished. Similarly, to reduce the aircraft's weight, the armour protection provided for the undercarriage and the underside of the fuselage was frequently removed, although that for the engine and pilot's back was retained.



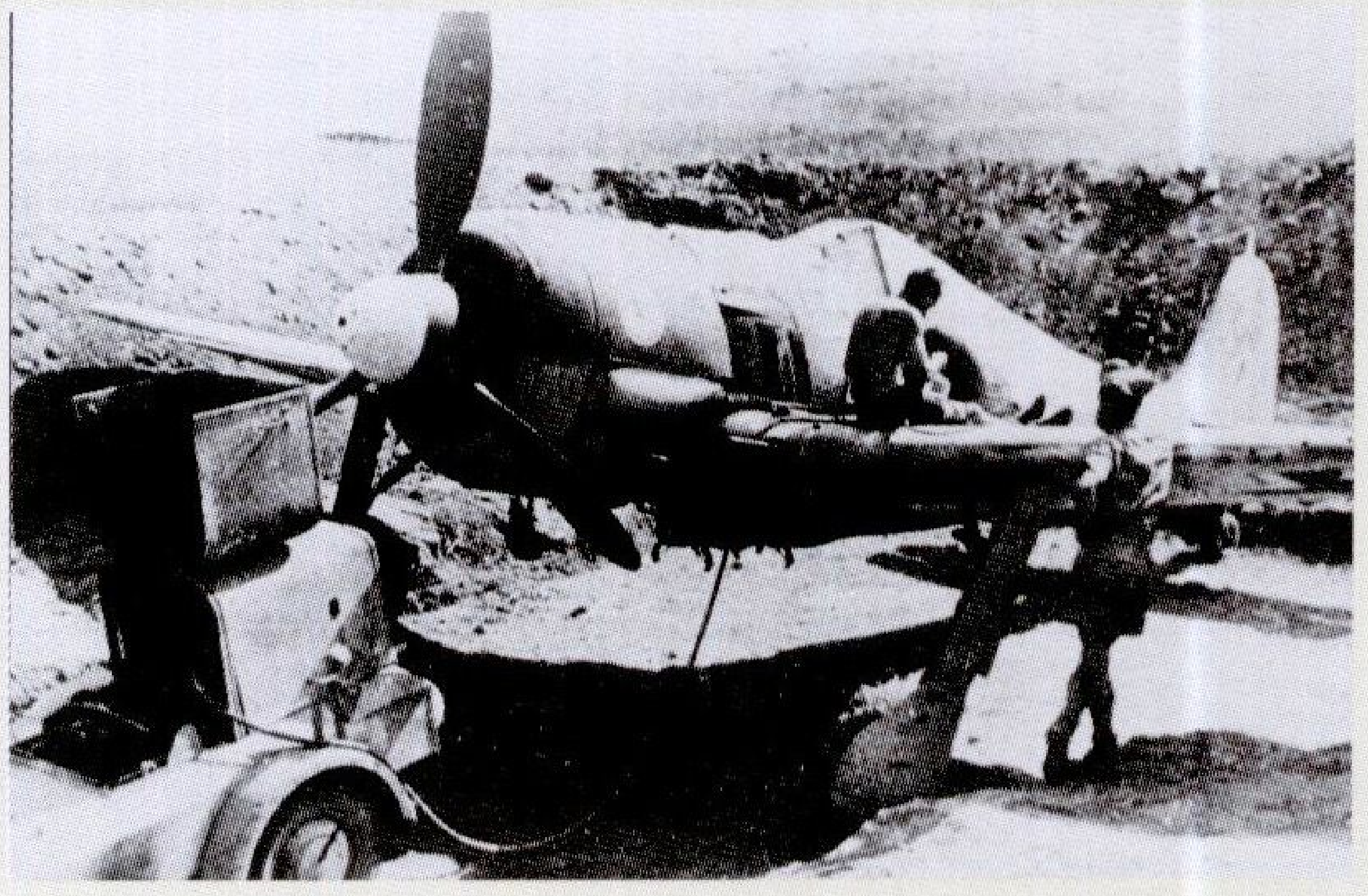
BELOW: Mechanics changing the engine of an Fw 190 belonging to SG 4 in Italy. Note that, to save weight and enhance the machine's speed and manoeuvrability, the armoured wheel covers have been removed from the undercarriage fairings.

Despite the loss of the *Ritterkreuzträger Ofw*. Hans Peterburs of II./SG 4, who was shot down and killed by Spitfires near Salerno on 11 January 1944, operations flown by SG 4 in early 1944 were occasionally moderately successful and were sometimes completed without losses. Targets were approached at low level and although intense Allied anti-aircraft fire limited attacks to only a single pass, good effects were achieved through the use of appropriate bombs. One of the most effective was the 500 kg high-explosive bomb fitted with the so-called 'Dinortstab' fuse extender which detonated the bomb above ground and optimised the blast and fragmentation effect. Another type widely employed against columns or concentrations of troops was the versatile AB series of bomb container. In the long term, however, SG 4's operations had no lasting effect on the Allied advance and by the early summer of 1944, increasing losses had again reached such proportions that, according to one post-war report, SG 4 alone was absorbing 50 per cent of the total output of new ground-attack pilots. Among the losses were such highly experienced *Schlachtflieger* as the Knight's Cross holder and *Kommandeur* of I./SG 4, *Hptm*. Heinrich Zwipf, who was killed when he was attacked by fighters from 239 Wing over his home airfield at Rieti on 7 April.



BELOW: The AB series of weapons, as seen in this view of an AB250-2 loaded beneath an Fw 190, opened at a pre-set height so that their contents were scattered over the ground. Note the horizontal join between the upper and lower halves of the container. The AB250-2 could be loaded with 144 bombs of the SD 2 type – potentially the most dangerous anti-personnel weapon employed during the Second World War – or 224 of the type SD 1 or 127 of the type SD 10A bombs. Although designed as anti-personnel weapons, all three types were also effective against motor transport and other soft-skinned vehicles.

In the spring of 1944, the shortage of fighter aircraft in Italy meant that the necessary fighter escort could only be provided for an average of one ground attack mission per day. With this decline in operations, the ground-attack aircraft no longer afforded any decisive support for the ground forces and the losses incurred had by then risen to a level out of all proportion to the successes achieved. By early May the situation had deteriorated further and it was decided that all available ground-attack aircraft in Italy should, as the occasion demanded, be employed on fighter duties alongside the regular fighter units in addition to their ground-attack role. By this time, the number of fighter aircraft in Italy had diminished as units were withdrawn to operate in defence of the *Reich*, and the transfer of I. and II./SG 4 to the fighter role was, perhaps, intended to help compensate for this loss. The Fw 190 pilots, some of whom had already been occasionally involved in air battles, were therefore trained to increase their effectiveness in this role. By mid-May they were indeed being occasionally employed as fighters and were taking part in attacks against Allied bomber formations, with some pilots proving remarkably successful.

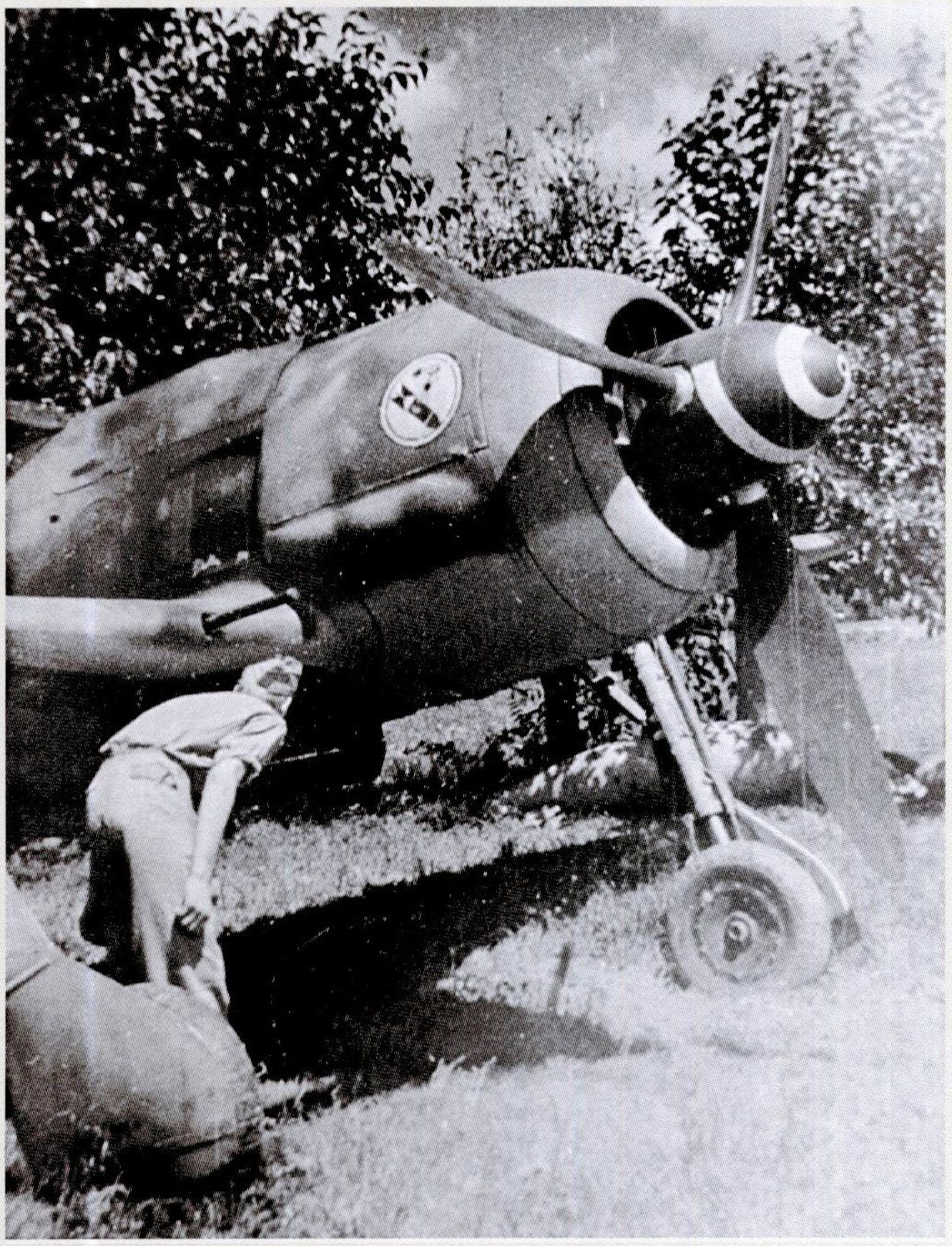


BELOW: During the spring of 1944, I./SG 4 operated the Fw 190 in a variety of versions which included a few F-3s plus the more numerous A-6 and G-3. In this interesting view of one of the unit's Fw 190 A-6s in its blast pen, note that the aircraft's spinner has a white tip rather than the spiral seen elsewhere.

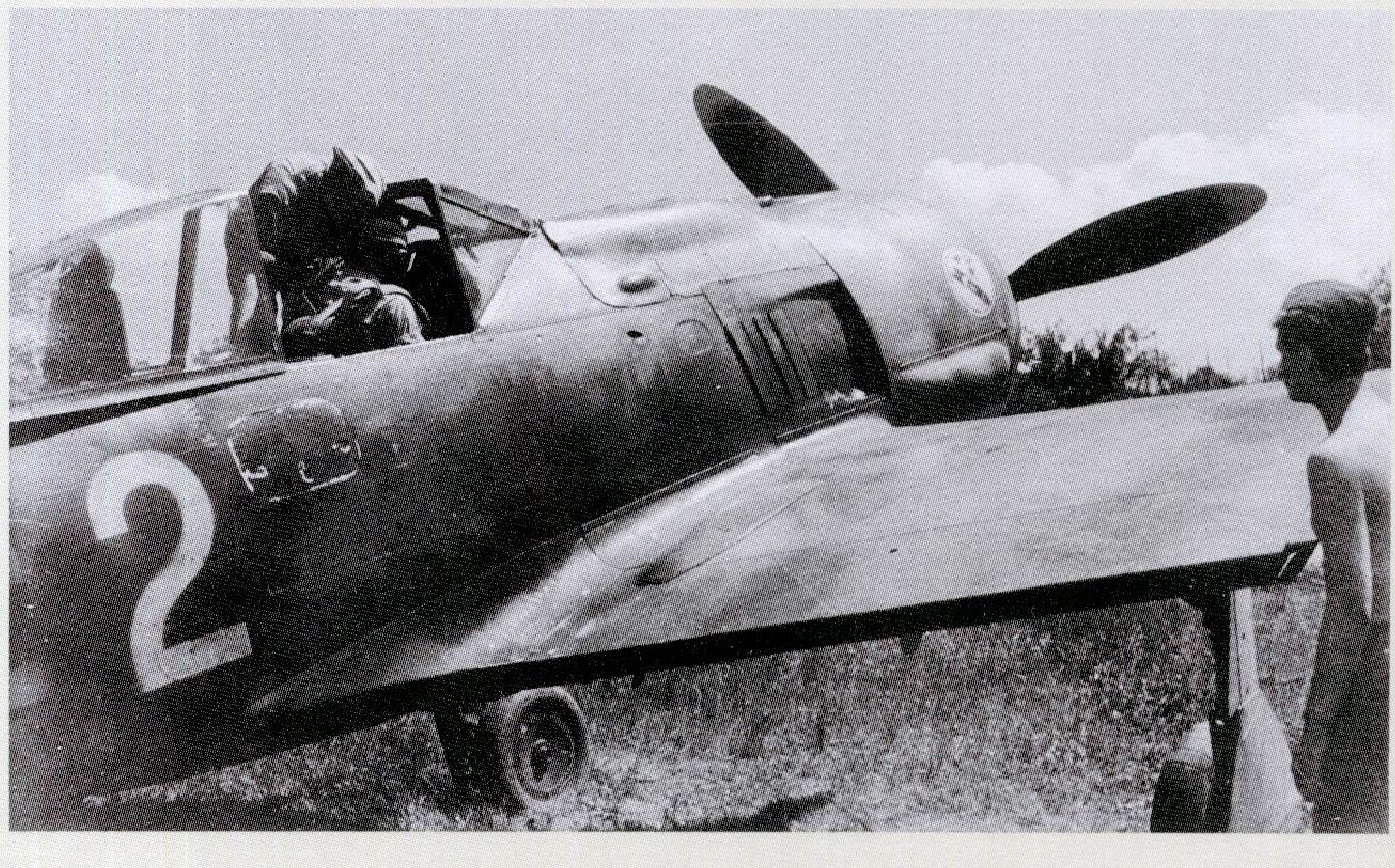
Nevertheless, after a few days, ground-attack missions were resumed and the list of casualties continued to increase, one being *Hptm*. Gerhard Walther who had been awarded the *Ritterkreuz* on 26 March. It is not known whether Walther was employed on ground-attack or air defence duties on 18 May, but on this day he became involved in an air battle with Spitfires near Rieti. Although he destroyed one Spitfire, he was then himself shot down and killed when he hit the tail of his aircraft while baling out and was unable to open his parachute. Similarly, on 21 May, seven pilots were lost in combat with Spitfires followed by four more on the 25th. Interestingly, some of the aircraft lost were Fw 190 F-8s, the first recorded losses of this sub-type in the Italian theatre by SG 4 which previously seems to have operated a mixture of Fw 190 A-6s, F-3s, G-2s and G-3s. The next day, the 26th, *Major* Dörffel himself was killed after taking off in an F-8 to intercept US four-engined bombers. For Dörffel, who had until recently been banned from flying in order to preserve his knowledge and experience, this was only his third operation since becoming *Kommodore*. On this occasion, he became involved in an air battle 15 km north-west of Rome, during which his Fw 190 F-8, W.Nr. 580464, was damaged, and although Dörffel baled out, he, like Walther, struck his aircraft's tail and was unable to open his parachute. On the same day, two other pilots, both of 6./ SG 4 were also shot down by Spitfires while flying F-8s.

Dörffel was replaced by *Major* Ewald Janssen who, as well as having served with dive-bomber and ground-attack units, had latterly been *Kommodore* of JG 302 and had therefore gained experience of fighter work when this unit was employed on home defence duties. Further losses followed and the last is thought to have occurred when *Lt*. Günther Entress of 6./SG 4 was killed in action by Spitfires on 31 May. By this time, I. *Gruppe* had only 14 aircraft left, of which just four were serviceable, while II. *Gruppe* had 27, of which nine were serviceable. The two *Gruppen* were then finally withdrawn to the Turin area in north-west Italy where they were restored to their full establishment strength. At first, the intention was to ready these *Gruppen* for use against any further Allied outflanking landings, but it was soon realised that the enemy's overwhelming air superiority had, in fact, rendered all further *Schlachtflieger* operations in Italy impossible.

Meanwhile, III./SG 4, now under the command of *Major* Gerhard Weyert had been held in eastern France in readiness for the anticipated Allied invasion. However, when this opened on 6 June 1944, Allied air superiority again prevented practically all attempts by the unit to intervene effectively in the fighting and this *Gruppe* had to be withdrawn after just two weeks of operations in Normandy. As a result of this and the similar experiences of I. and II./SG 4 in Italy, all *Gruppen* were withdrawn for employment on the eastern Front where ground-attack formations could still operate with reasonable safety. Except for a brief period of operations between October 1944 and early 1945 when the unit was employed during the Ardennes offensive and Operation *'Bodenplatte'* in the West, SG 4 remained in the East. At the end of the war *Schlachtgeschwader* SG 4 was operating as part of VIII. *Fliegerkorps* under *Luftflottenkommando* 6.

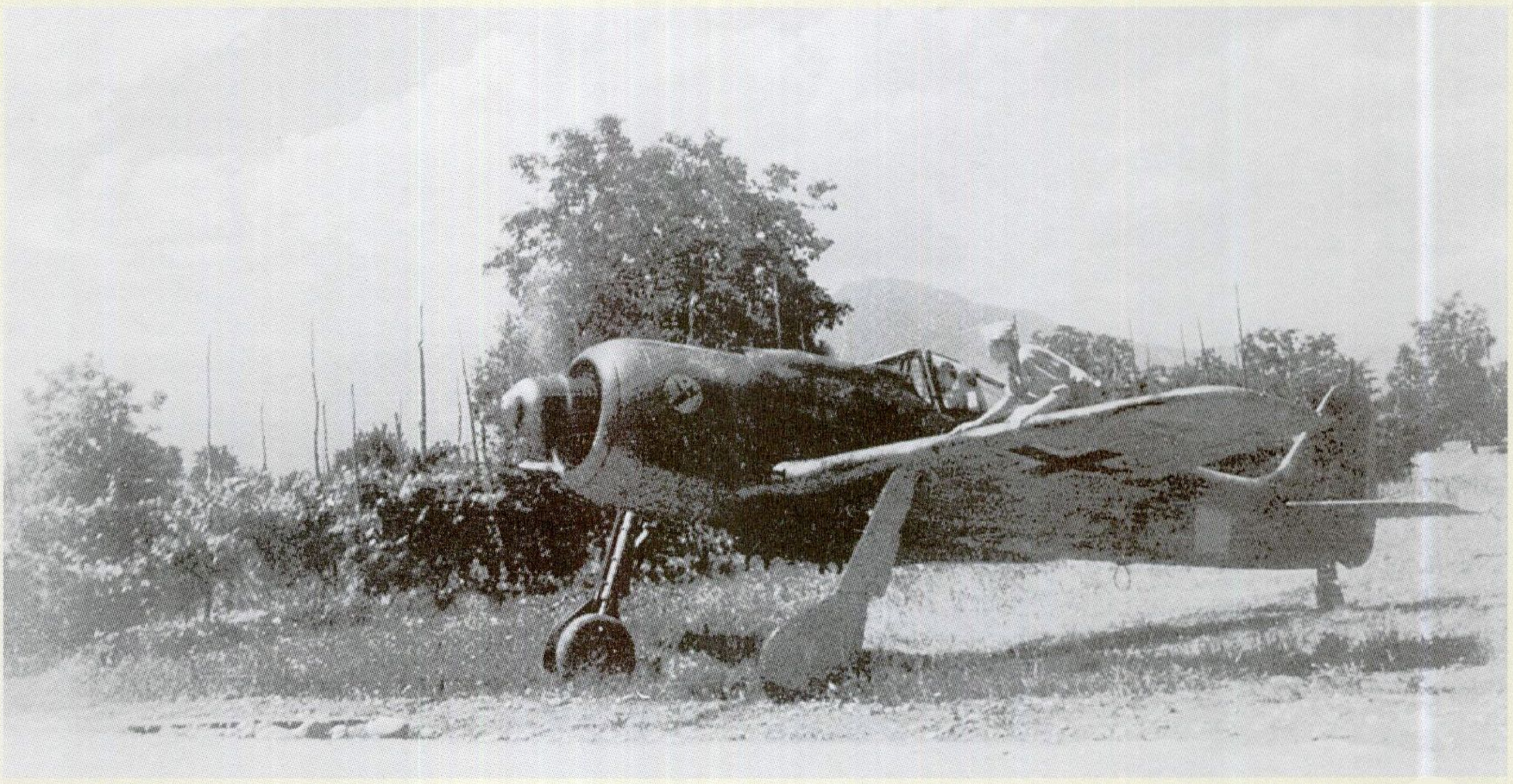


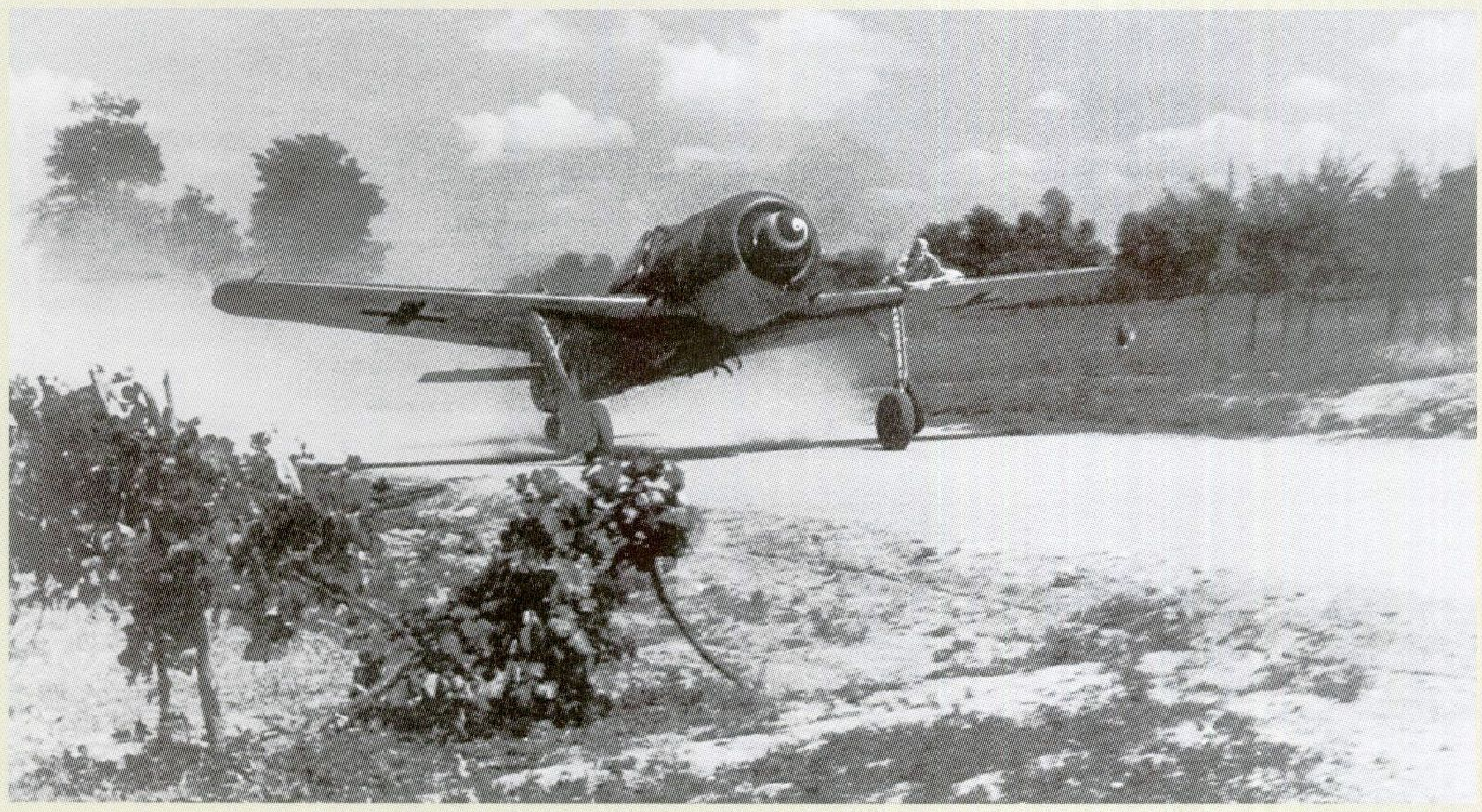
LEFT: Although it is believed that this and all the following photographs were taken either in the Turin area of north-west Italy after I. and II. Gruppen had been withdrawn from operations in order to replace its losses and re-equip with new Fw 190 F-8s, this view nevertheless provides a good indication of the measures employed by these Gruppen to conceal their aircraft during the period they were on operations in Italy. Here, an Fw 190 has been parked amid trees on the edge of the airfield. Note the abrupt ending to the white spiral on the spinner.



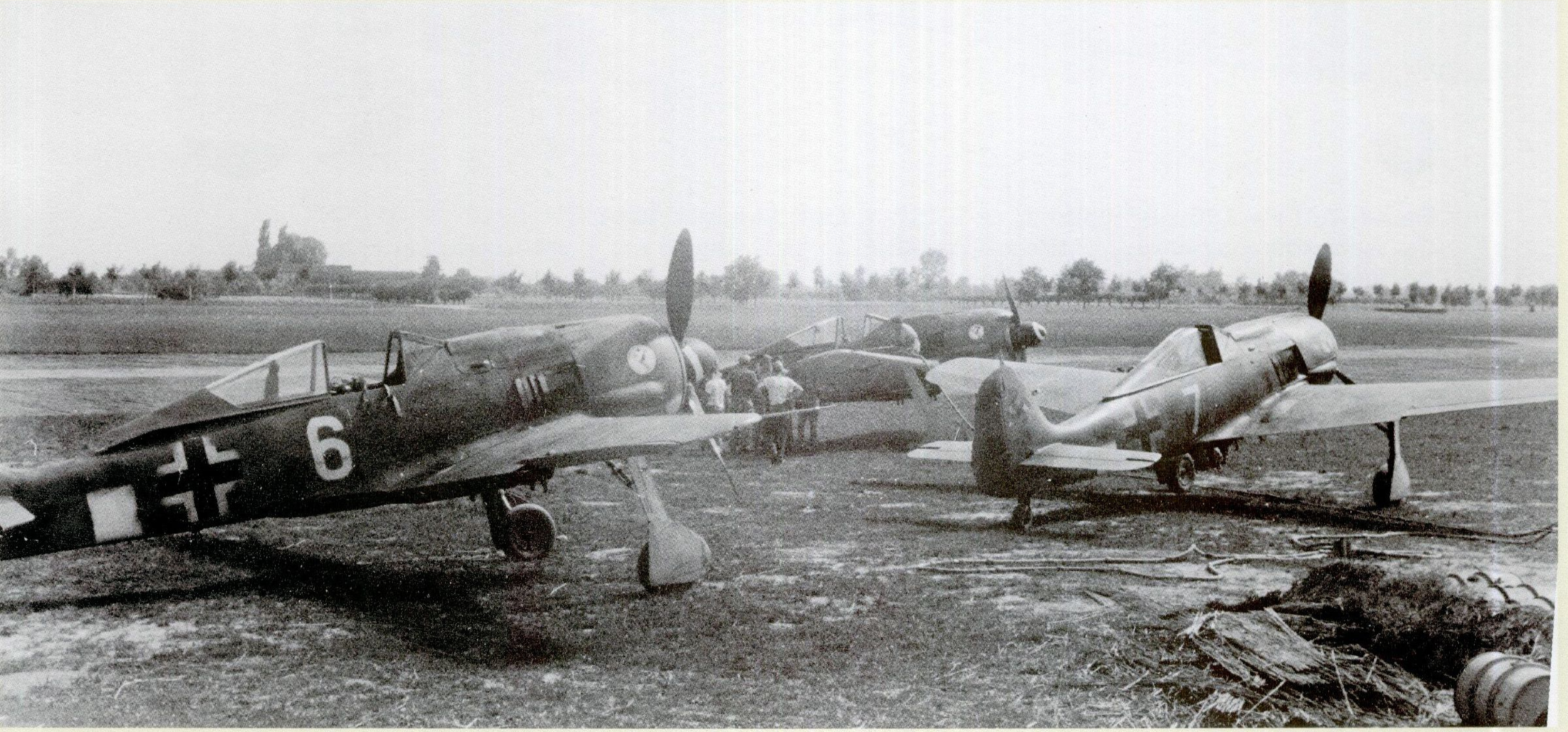
ABOVE: Ground crew of 1./SG 4 helping the pilot of 'White 2' strap in. Although this aircraft lacks head armour, a blown canopy and underwing bomb racks, it is thought that this is, in fact, an Fw 190 F-8, a version which was delivered to SG 4 in May 1944, shortly before the unit was withdrawn from the front due to its high losses. By this time the Luftwaffe's ground-attack units had phased out their earlier letter codes in favour of fighter-style markings.

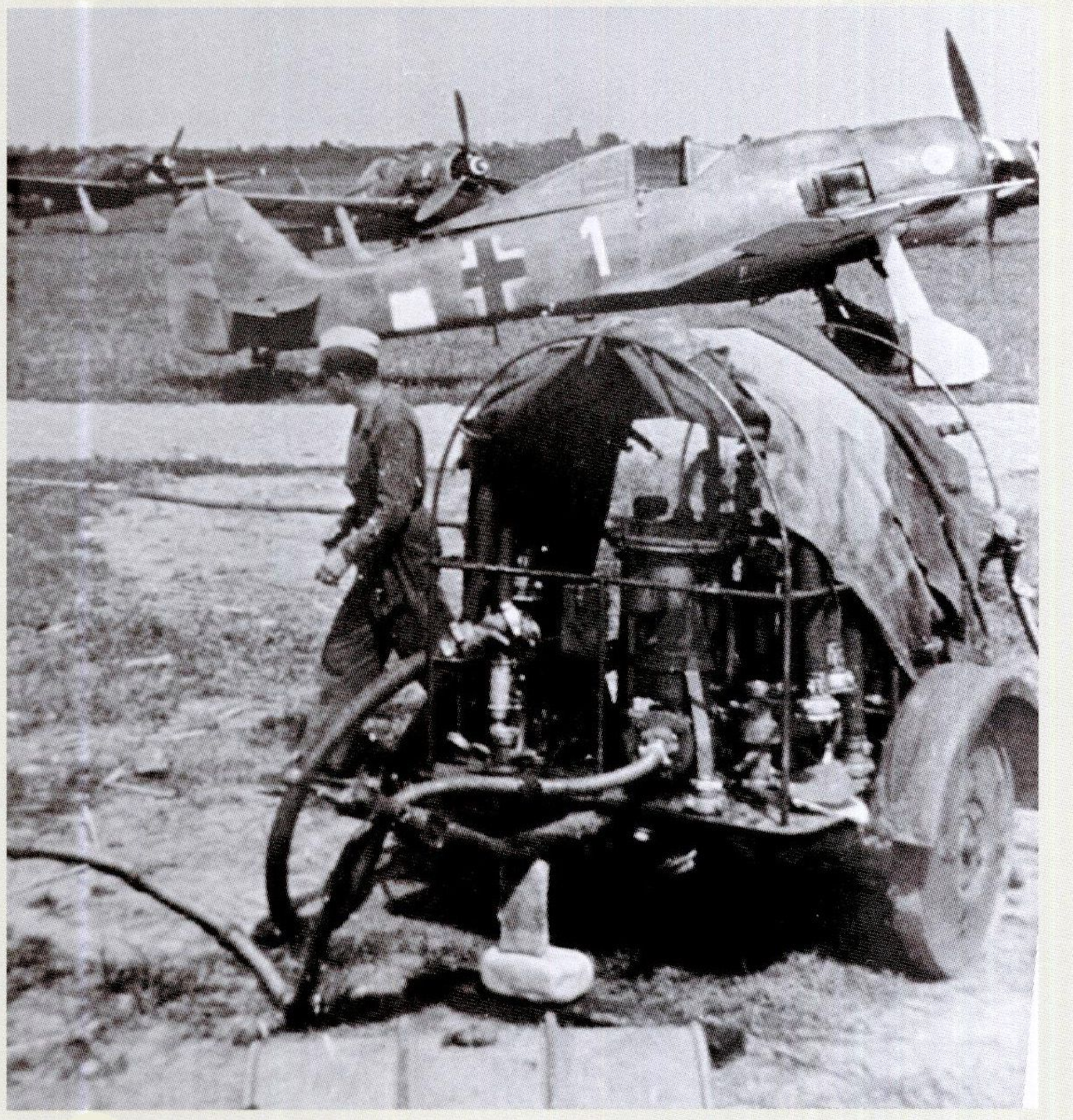
RIGHT AND BELOW: An Fw 190 emerging from its concealed dispersal and taxiing with a member of the ground staff positioned on the port wing to guide the pilot. The empty bomb rack suggests that the aircraft is either preparing for a non-operational flight or is taxiing purely for the benefit of the photographer and would tend to support the view that these photographs were taken somewhere far removed from the main battle lines.



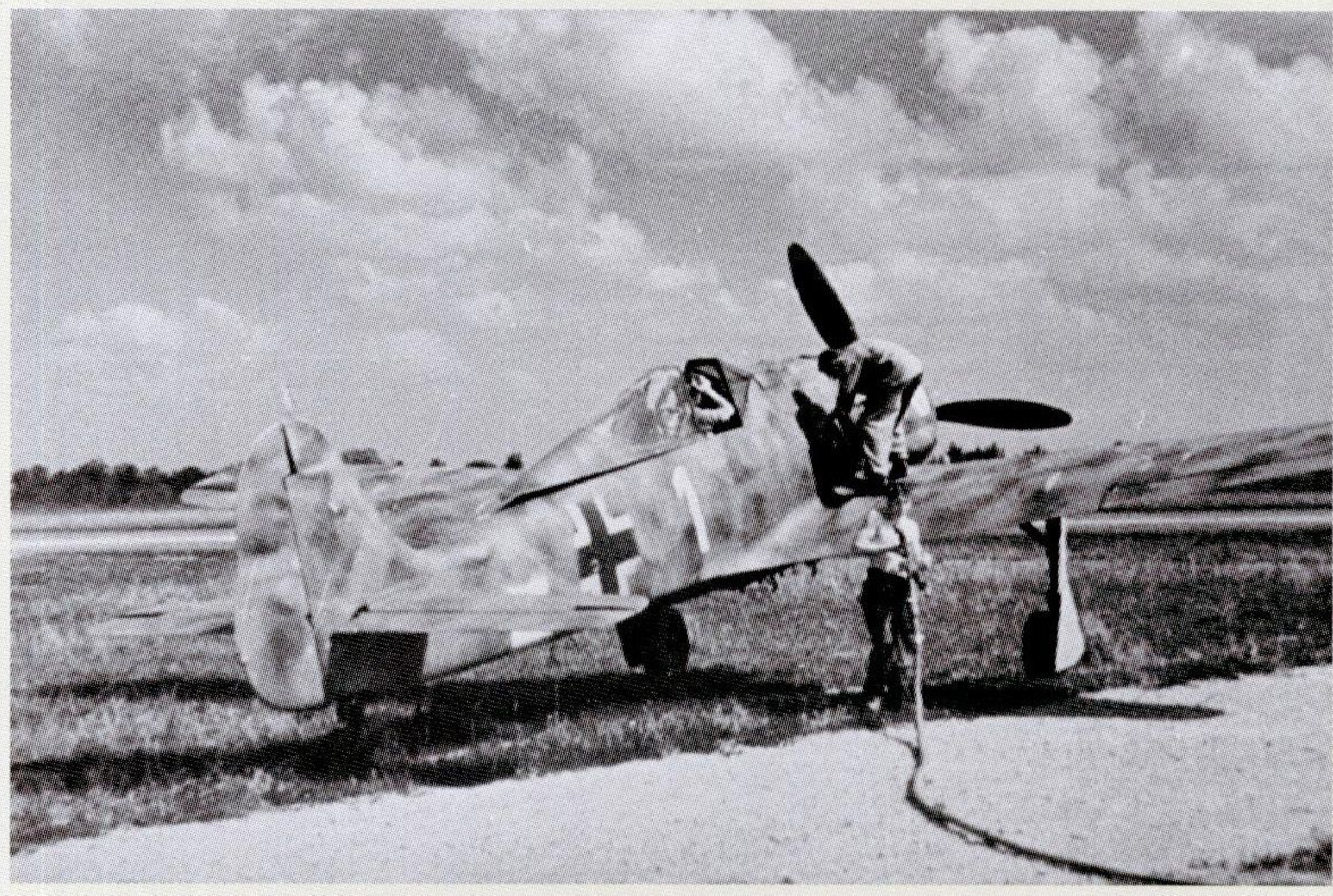


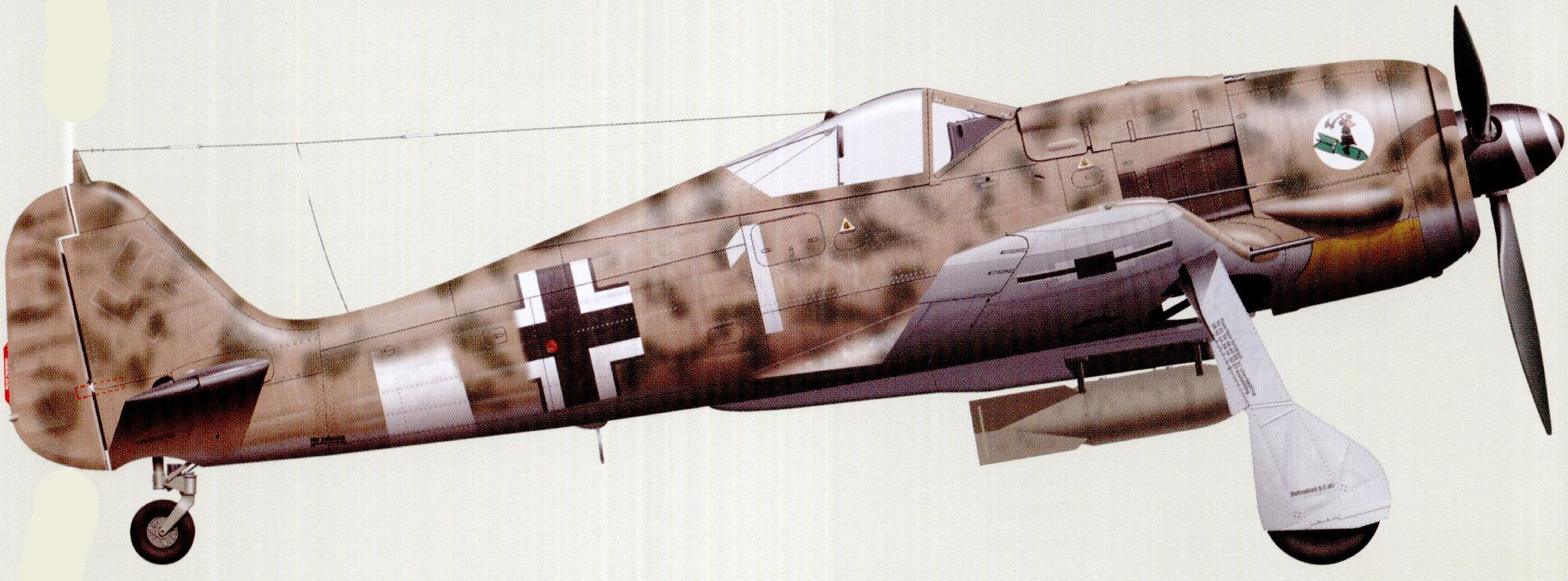
BELOW: In complete contrast to the preceding photographs, no precautions against attack are evident in this part of the sequence showing Fw 190 F-8s of 1./SG 4 awaiting refuelling. The bulged cowling ahead of the cockpit indicates that these aircraft are fitted with 13 mm fuselage weapons. The two MG 151 cannon in the wing roots of the ground - attack versions were retained but the outboard cannon were not installed.





LEFT AND BELOW: Once again it is clear that these photographs were taken when there appeared little likelihood of attack as none of the usually meticulously observed measures adopted by SG 4 when operating close to the front in Italy are in evidence and the gravel taxiways would have revealed the presence of the airfield to any roaming Allied aircraft. This Fw 190 F-8, 'White 1', of 1./SG 4 was probably the aircraft assigned to the Staffelkapitän. As with most aircraft of I./SG 4 photographed at this time, the camouflage has been applied without masking the national insignia which, on the uppersurface of the wings and tail, have been overpainted. The overspray on the fuselage Balkenkreuz, too, shows that it was not masked off, while the aircraft number has clearly been applied after the re-camouflaging was completed.

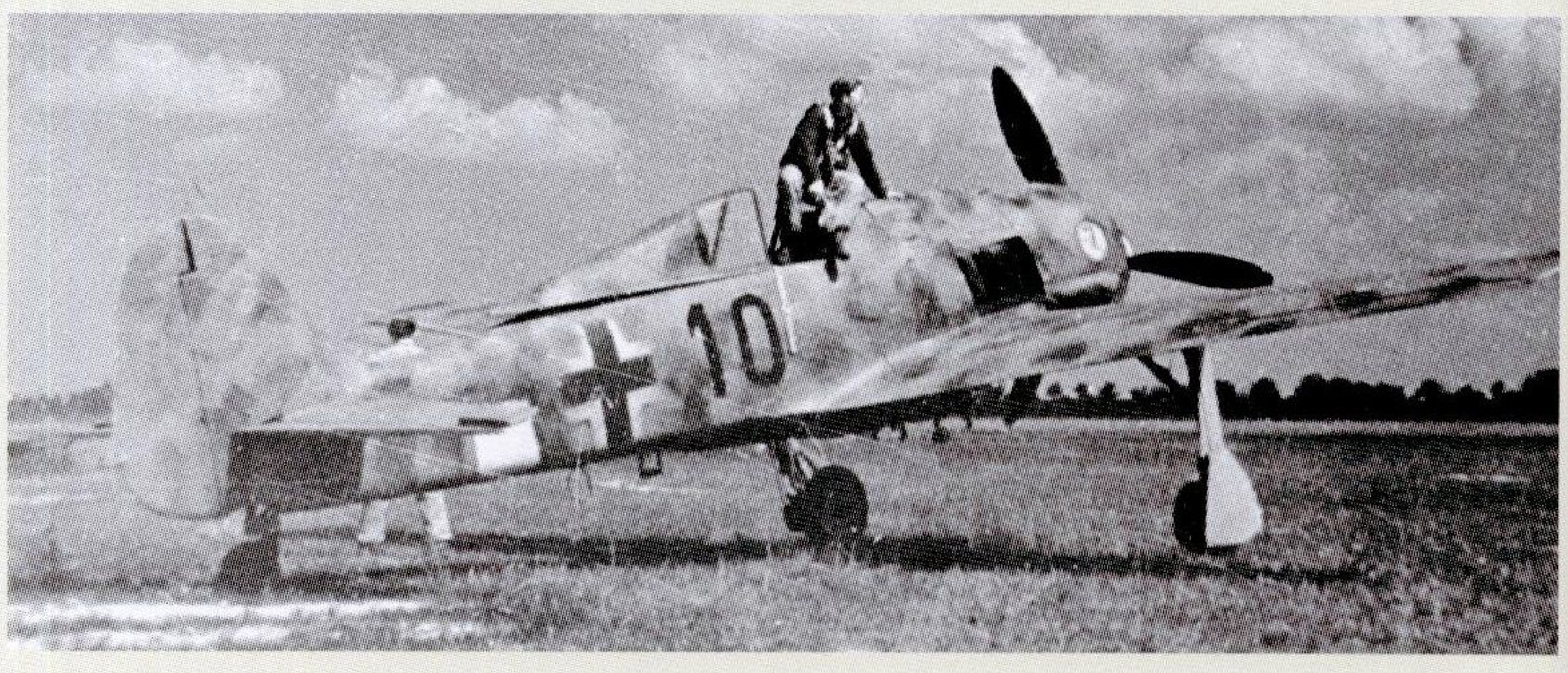




Focke-Wulf Fw 190 F-8 'White 1' of 1./SG 4, Late Summer 1944

The uppersurface camouflage on this and the other aircraft illustrated was a unit scheme which, from the partly oversprayed national markings and white fuselage band, was clearly applied over the original factory scheme without any masking of the national insignia. Clearly the unit badge and fuselage numeral were added after this field camouflage had been completed and which is believed to have been RLM 79 and 80 over standard RLM 76 undersurfaces. Note how the end of the white spiral terminates in a hard line.

RIGHT: 'Black 10' of 2./SG 4 showing again the camouflage scheme adopted when it was envisaged that both I. and II./SG 4 would return to operations in Italy. Note that as well as the national markings on the tail and the wing uppersurfaces, the top of the white fuselage band has also been obscured to aid concealment from the air.



The 'Pik As' Geschwader departs

June 1944 was without doubt the last month of any significant activity by the remaining German day fighter units in Italy: I./JG 77 at Bologna; II./JG 77 at Ferrara; III./JG 53 at Maniago and I./JG 4 at Lavariano. On 5 June, the Allies entered Rome and while the *Luftwaffe* had to retreat to more northerly airfields, the fighters discontinued their *freie Jagd* sorties over the front. As there was no longer the requirement for *Jabo* escort since SG 4 had been pulled out of the line, the fighters were ordered to concentrate instead on the heavy bombers which were wrecking airfields and attacking other points of strategic importance. The battle against the bombers, however, would cause many casualties including *Lt.* Franz Nägele. Nägele was one of the most experienced pilots of 6./JG 77 and had achieved ten victories in Russia and North Africa and added another seven in Italy, three of which were bombers. He was killed near Monte Almeano on the 9th while attacking Flying Fortresses.

On 10 June, *Lt.* Erich Müller of II./JG 77 claimed the only victory recorded by JG 77 that day when he shot down a B-24 as his 20th victory, but during an Allied attack on Ferrara airfield, ten of the *Gruppe's* Bf 109 Gs were destroyed. On the 13th, II./JG 77 shot down two B-24s, one of which was the 100th victory for the *Kommandeur*, Siegfried Freytag, and on the 22nd, *Hptm.* Joachim Deicke, the *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 77, was obliged to make a forced landing. He was uninjured and, four days later, claimed a B-24 as his 15th victory.

All told, the two *Gruppen* of JG 77 were operational over Italy on only 11 days in June, but an interesting point to emerge is that this was the only time in 1944 when the unit really achieved some success against the bombers, which were becoming more active. This was due to the fact that many of the Allied escort fighters had been sent to support the Normandy invasion, but with 1,830 US bombers operating in the area, the German claims represented just one per cent of the four-engined bombers for a loss of 17 per cent of the German fighter force. Thus this single example illustrates that while the *Jagdwaffe* in Italy certainly did not lack courage, its best achievements were but an insignificant pinprick against the numbers of aircraft the US could commit to the campaign.

Meanwhile, I./JG 4 and III./JG 53 were rarely engaged in June. I./JG 4 had suffered heavy losses in the preceding weeks and was below strength, claiming only five enemy aircraft destroyed, and on 30 June, when operating over Croatia, had two more of its pilots shot down, one being *Gefr.* August Rohlfs, wingman to *Fw.* Herbert Schäfer. Schäfer himself then claimed a P-51 before he was shot down. Both pilots were captured by partisans and were reunited in a PoW camp, after which they were involved in separate exchanges of prisoners and eventually returned to their *Gruppe*. Throughout June, III./JG 53 claimed just six victories, losing three pilots before being ordered to leave the area, but not before the former *Geschwader Kommodore*, *Oberst* Günther von Maltzahn, paid a visit on the 24th to say goodbye to the last *'Pik As' Gruppe* to operate in the Mediterranean.

Luftwaffe and RSI Fighter Units in Italy, 22 June 1944

I./JG 4	Poggio Renatico	13	(9)
Stab/JG 53	Bologna	0	(0)
III./JG 53	Maniago	20	(11)
Stab/JG 77	Poggio Renatico	6	(4)
I./JG 77	Parts at Forli and Bologna	41	(24)
II/JG 77	Poggio Renatico and Ferrara	30	(14)
I° *Gruppo Caccia*	Reggio-Emilia	59	(33)
II° *Gruppo Caccia*	Cascina Vaga	19	(11)

By the end of the month JG 77 had been virtually reunited on airfields situated around Lake Garda, with the *Stab* at Bettola; I./JG 77 at Ghedi II and II./JG 77 on Ghedi I. Elsewhere, there were various moves. In the Balkans, 7./JG 27 finally left the Aegean at the end of June and was transferred to the Invasion Front in France where it became involved in the aerial battles over Normandy. To take its place and continue the defence of the area, II./JG 51, then based at Wrasdebna, sent its 5. *Staffel* to Kalamaki. Meanwhile, the remaining 4. and 6./JG 51 were heavily engaged over Serbia and Croatia, claiming a total of 12 victories in June, three of these being claimed by *Oblt.* Otto Schulz, commander of 6./JG 51, and one by the *Kommandeur*, *Hptm.* Karl Rammelt. Total aircraft losses are unknown, but it seems there were no casualties among the personnel.

The Departure of I./JG 77 and I./JG 4

The only German fighter units remaining in Italy at the beginning of July were *Stab*, I. and II./JG 77 assembled at Ghedi, and I./JG 4 at Lavariano. To concentrate its meagre forces, the German high command moved I./JG 4 to Maniago on the 4th so that all *Gruppen* were on the same defence line, covering the Udine gap to Austria. The most heavily engaged units were those of JG 77 which took off to intercept bomber forces attacking targets in Austria and southern Germany, but successes were rare and two pilots were killed in return for just five victories in the whole month. Nevertheless, although the German pilots had little to show for it, the fighting was fierce and on the 14th, *Obstlt.* Steinhoff and his wingman, *Fhj.Fw.* Gottfried Fährmann, were both shot down by Spitfires escorting B-25 medium bombers. Both survived, Fährmann baling out while the *Kommodore* crash-landed his G-6. The same day, Spitfires shot down *Oblt.* Kurt Hammel, *Kapitän* of 1./JG 77, who was wounded. Hammel had had a very long career; originally with I./JG 77 in 1941, he became a *Staffelführer* with JG 5 in 1942 and, after serving as an instructor at Cazaux in France, he had joined 8./JG 27 in 1943 and had taken part in the battles over the Aegean in October and November 1943. He had only taken command of 1./JG 77 in May, but after recovering from his wounds, he returned to the *Staffel* at the end of 1944.

As these and other valuable pilots were put out of action, a few younger pilots rose to take their place. *Lt.* Eduard Mühleise of *Stab* II./JG 77, for example, claimed on the 18th and 19th, a P-51 and a B-24 respectively, and seems to have claimed all his victories in a very short period, these possibly including a Spitfire which he is believed to have rammed. Unit losses were then so high that in March 1944, Mühleise had already risen to the position of *Staffelführer* of 6./JG 77. He was eventually shot down and captured during the battle at Arnhem in September 1944 after ramming a Stirling as his seventh victory.

As already mentioned, I./JG 4 was not particularly active in July but *Hptm.* Wilhelm Steinmann, *Kapitän* of 1./JG 4, claimed three victories. None of these was confirmed, although Steinmann would later receive the *Ritterkreuz*. The I./JG 4 was then ordered out of Italy, leaving its surviving Bf 109s to be taken over by II° *Gruppo Caccia* and its most inexperienced pilots by II./JG 77 at Ghedi. On the way to Ghedi, *Fhj.Uffz.* René Darbois deserted and landed at Santa Maria, an airfield occupied by the USAAF [7]. On the 25th, I./JG 77 was also ordered out of Italy, passing its aircraft over to II./JG 77 and I° *Gruppo Caccia*.

German Units in Italy on 10 July 1944

2./NSG 2	Rimini	12	(6)
1./NSG 9	Ravenna	11	(6)
2./NSG 9	Rimini	7	(6)
1./NAG 11	Forli	9	(6)
Stab and 2./NAG 11	Poggio	8	(7)
II° *Gruppo Caccia*	Villafranca di Verona	19	(11)
Stab/JG 77	Ghedi	6	(2)
I./JG 77	Ghedi:	21	(8)
II./JG 77	Ghedi:	26	(15)
Ital. I° *Gruppo Caccia*	Vicenza	39	(unknown)
Luftbeob. St. 7	Villaorba	(unknown)	(unknown)
I./JG 4	Maniago	19	(11)
Stab FAG 122	Bergamo	(unknown)	(unknown)
1./123 (being withdrawn)	Bergamo	3	(3)
2./122	Bergamo	4	(3)
4./122	Bergamo	(unknown)	(unknown)*
6./122	Bergamo	4	(3)
Ital. *Torp. Gruppo*	Lonate	29	(16)

**This unit was being transferred to Italy. It had 8 aircraft on 30 June and 6 on 31 July.*

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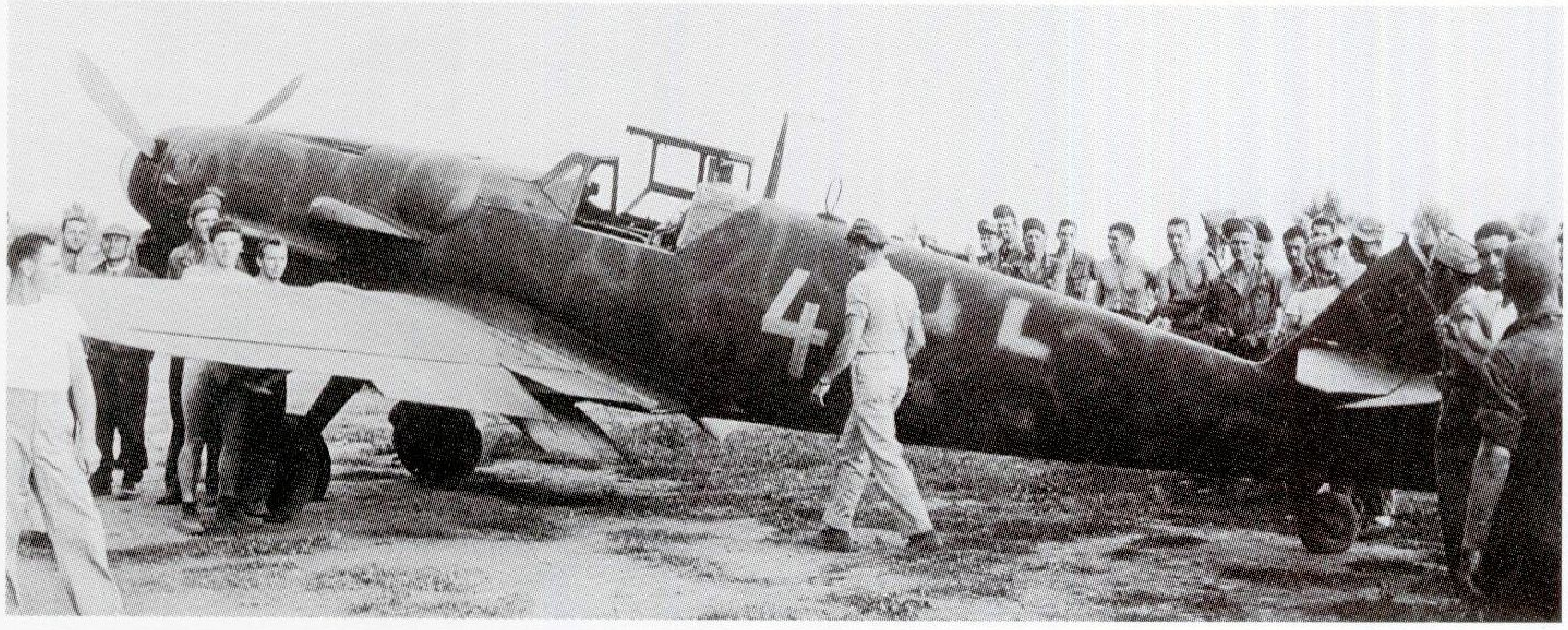
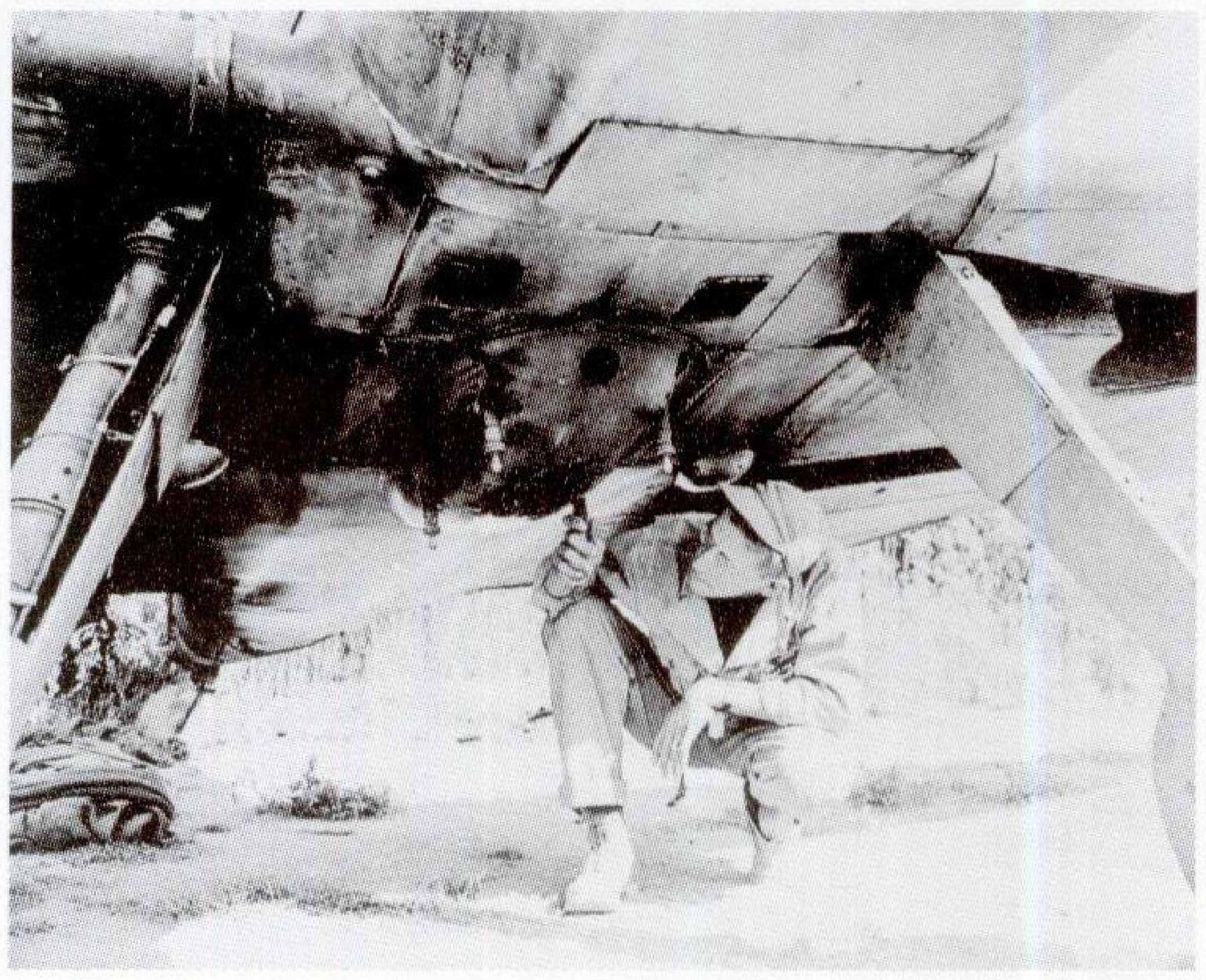
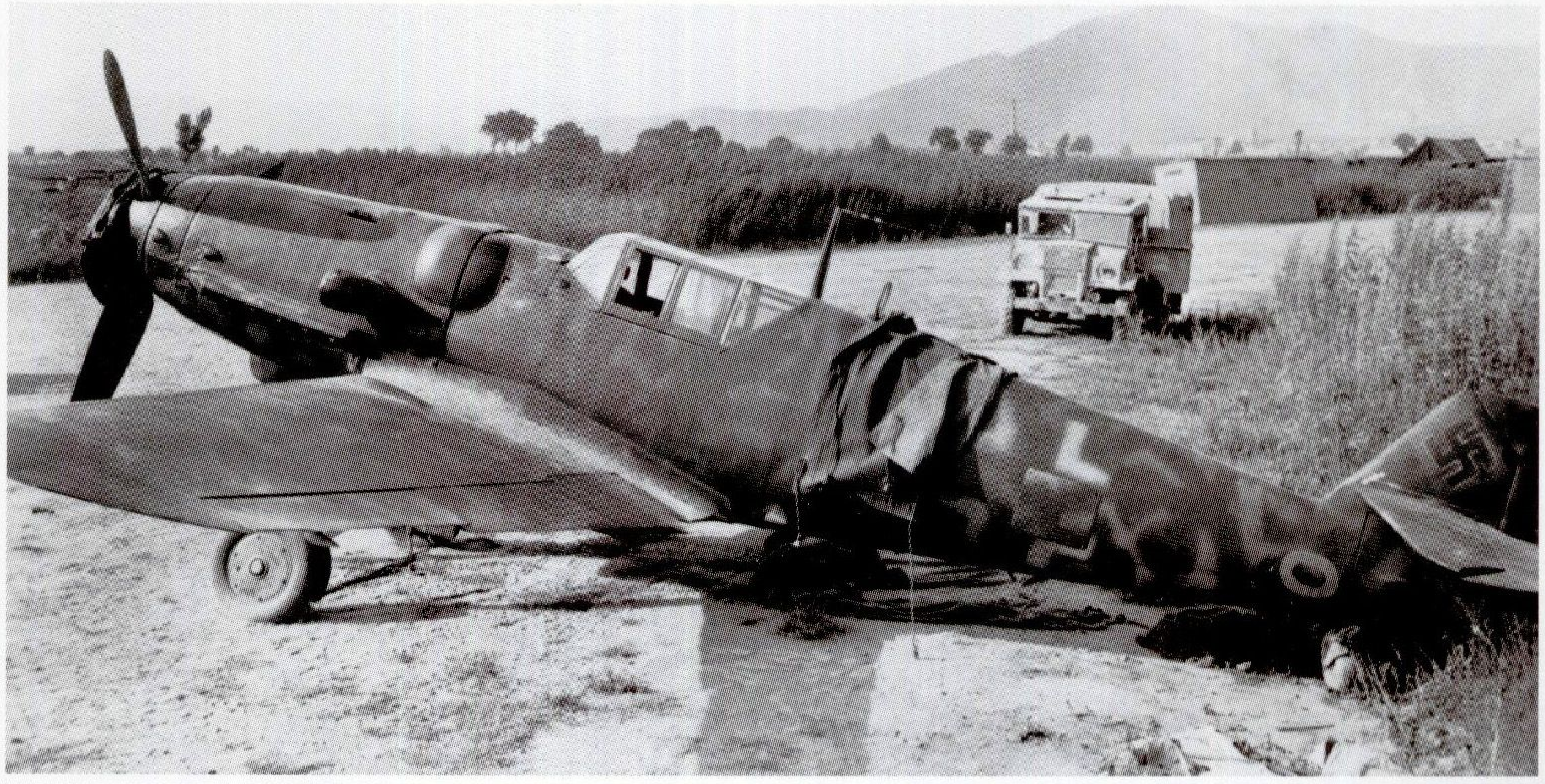
[7] Darbois came from Lorraine, an area annexed to Germany after the fall of France, and had long planned to defect. He later joined the Free French air force and is believed to have flown against his former comrades at the end of the war. After the war, he joined the French Armée de l'Air and fought in Indo-China where he flew helicopters. He is reported to have died in the 1960s.

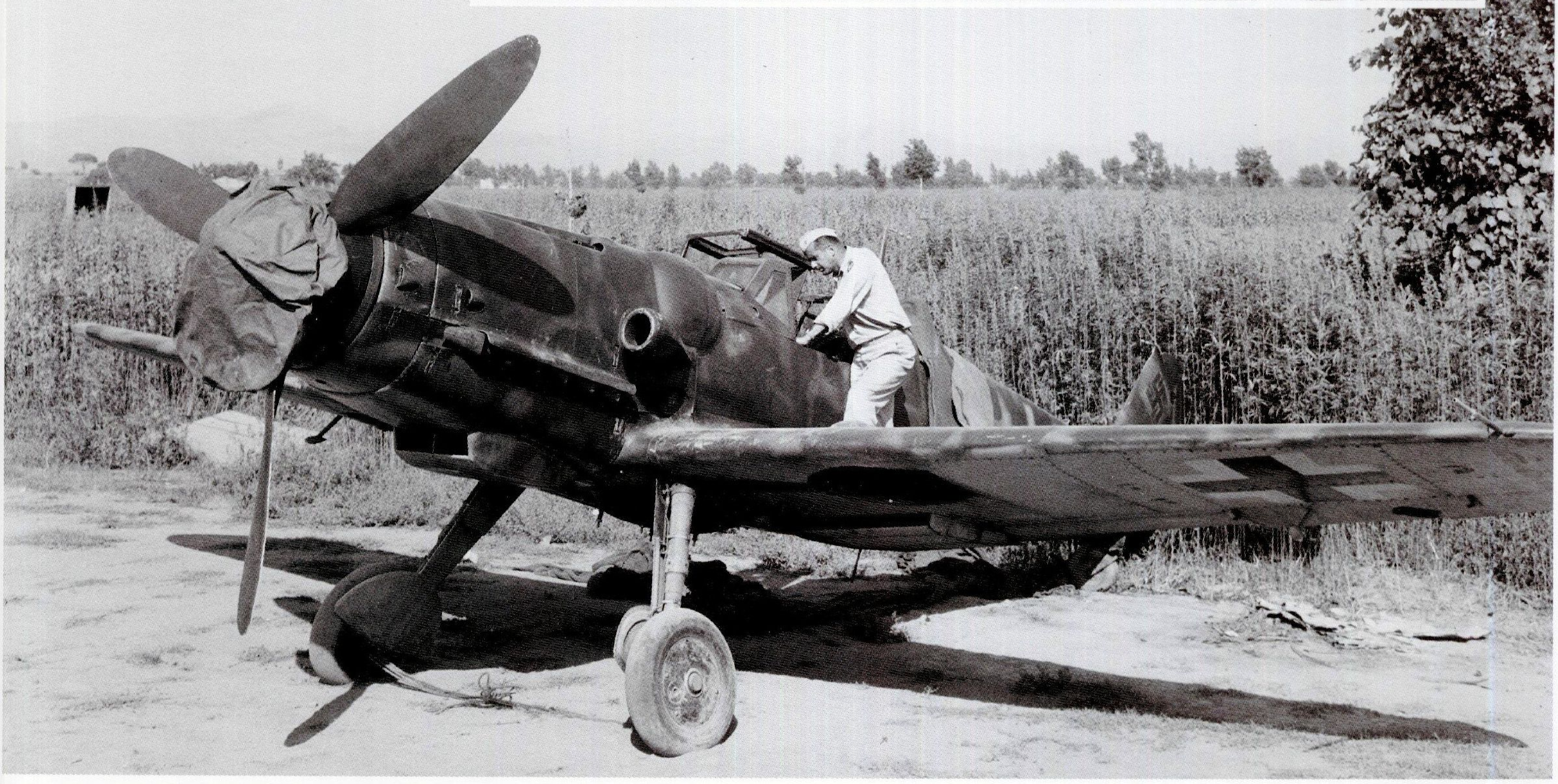


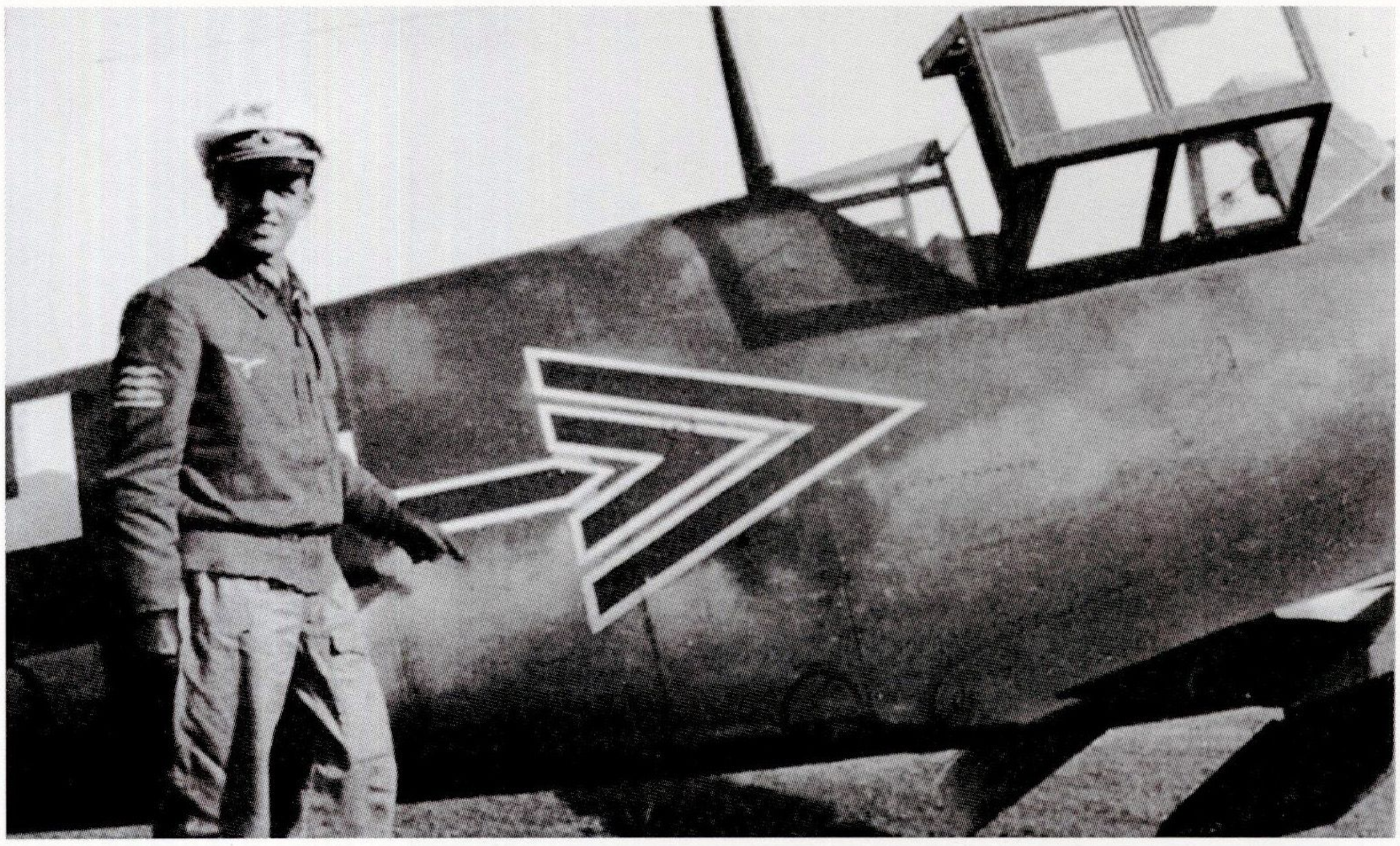
BELOW: An American serviceman examining the underside of Darbois' aircraft at Santa Maria Capua Vetere.



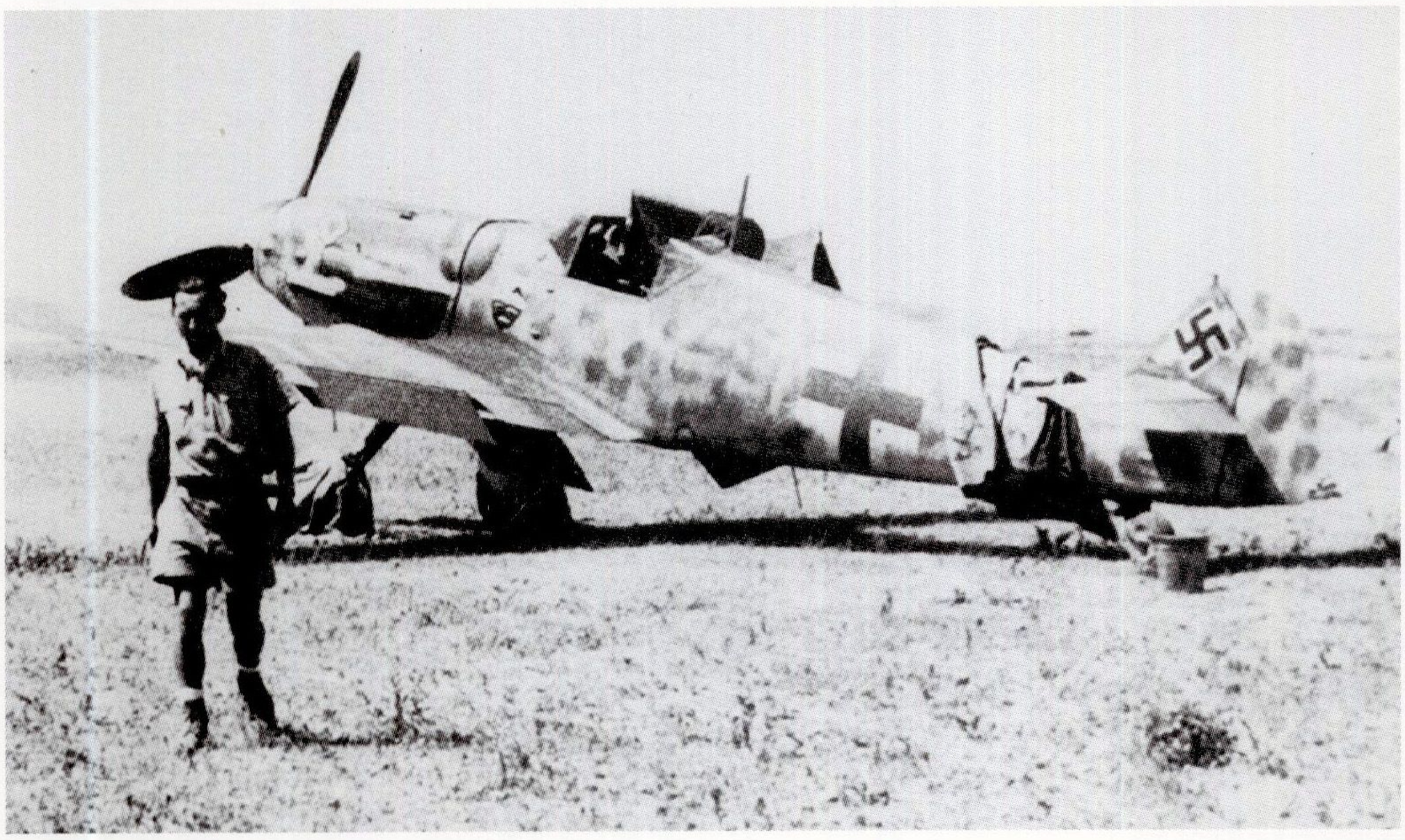
THIS PAGE: The Bf 109 G-6, W.Nr. 160756, Stammkennzeichen KT+LL, flown by Uffz. René Darbois of I./JG 4. This Gruppe, then stationed at Maniago, was due to be withdrawn from operations and its aircraft and pilots handed over to II./JG 77 at Ghedi. The transfer flight to Ghedi took place on the afternoon of 25 July 1944 but Darbois seized this opportunity to carry out his long-planned defection. As the formation had been ordered to maintain radio silence, Darbois used hand signals to inform his leader that he was unwell and left the formation. Darbois' wingman had followed him when he broke formation, and after signalling him to rejoin the leader, Darbois changed course and headed for the airfields around Rome. After flying through some bad weather, he decided to land at the American-occupied airfield at Santa Maria Capua Vetere, which he approached rocking his wings and with his wheels and flaps down. The control tower gave him a green light and he made a perfect landing. Apart from handing over a perfectly airworthy aircraft, Darbois was also in possession of intelligence material concerning his unit. The photograph top left shows Darbois' aicraft a few minutes after landing. The uppersurface camouflage on this aircraft was dark green with a random overspray of brown flecks and short, wavy lines, the individual aircraft identity number on the fuselage was 'Yellow 4'. This machine was later taken to the USA where it received the serials FE-496 and, later, T2-496. It is presently on display in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. It should be noted, however, that Darbois may have given his interrogators an entirely fictitious story regarding the circumstances of his desertion.



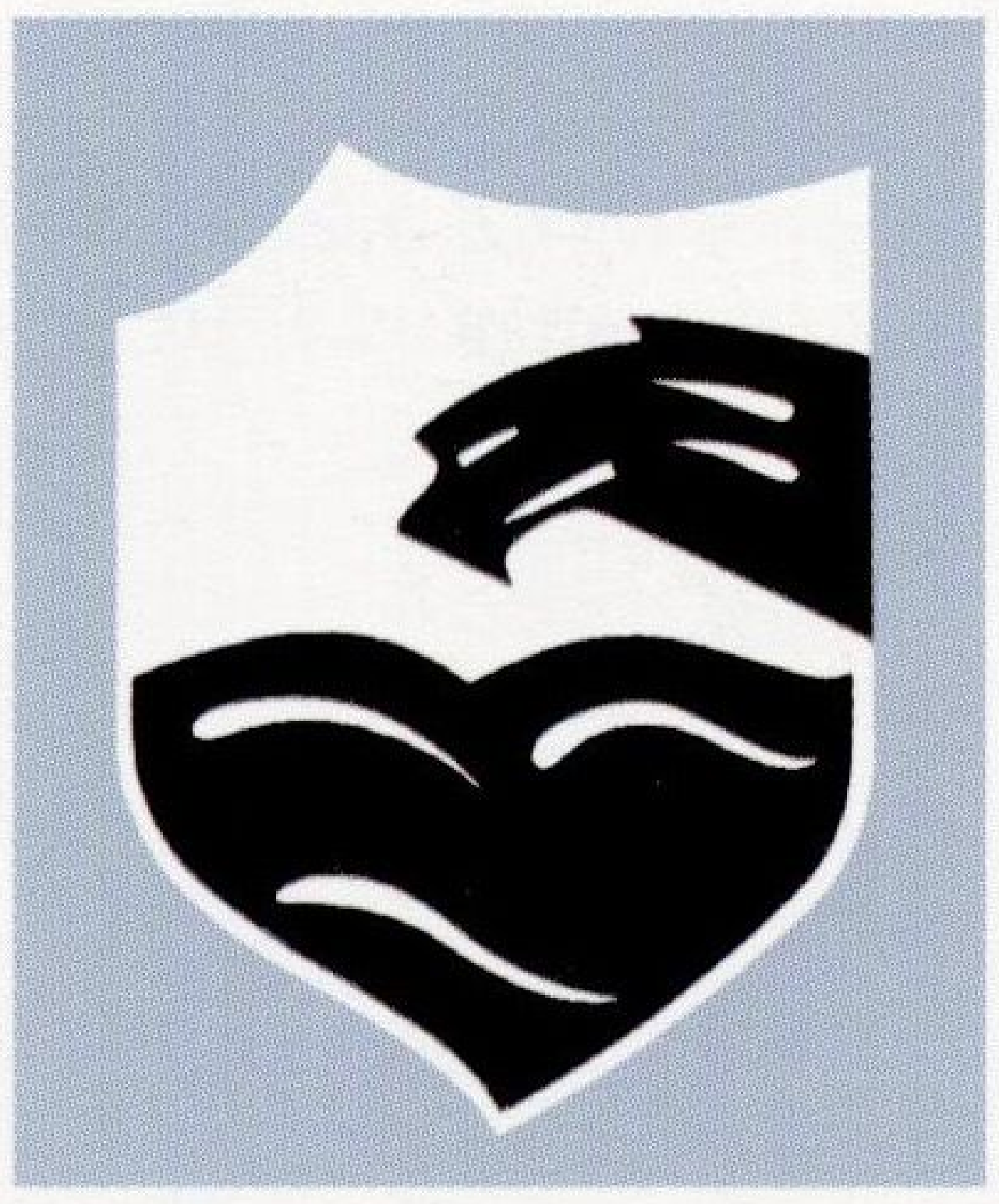




RIGHT: Major Ernst Düllberg became the Kommandeur of III./JG 27 on 11 October 1942 and was still leading the Gruppe when it left the Mediterranean theatre in July 1944. In that period Düllberg had been awarded the German Cross in Gold in January 1944, at which time he had a total of 28 victories and, by the time his Gruppe left the Mediterranean theatre, he had increased this to 34. Düllberg then achieved another three victories in the Reichsverteidigung and was awarded the Ritterkreuz on 20 July 1944. It is interesting to compare this with the scores achieved at that time by pilots in the East, some of whom had well over 100 victories yet had still not received this prized decoration. Düllberg continued to lead III./JG 27 until 30 September 1944.



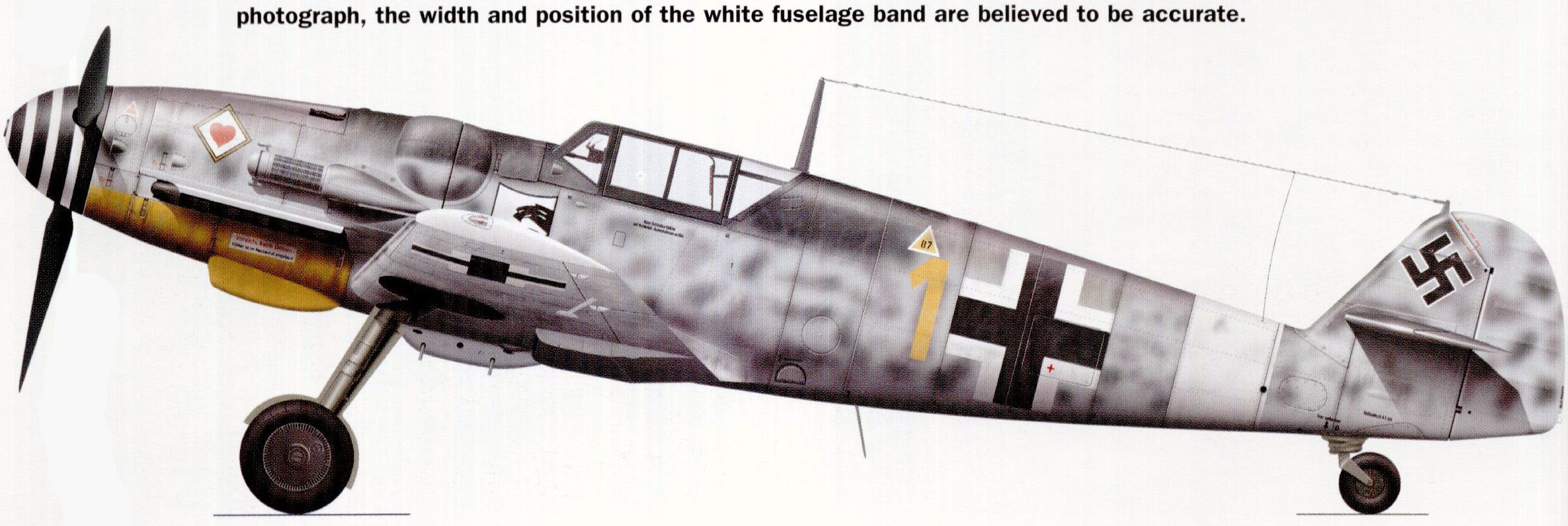
LEFT: A Bf 109 G-6 coded 'Yellow 1' of 6./JG 77 in the Italian sunshine. Note the II. Gruppe badge under the windscreen featuring a black eagle's head over a black sea, and the Geschwader's 'Herz As' badge on the engine cowling. An unusual feature of this Staffel was that for a period of almost two years – from February 1943 to January 1945 – it had only one Kapitän, Oblt. Joachim Deicke.

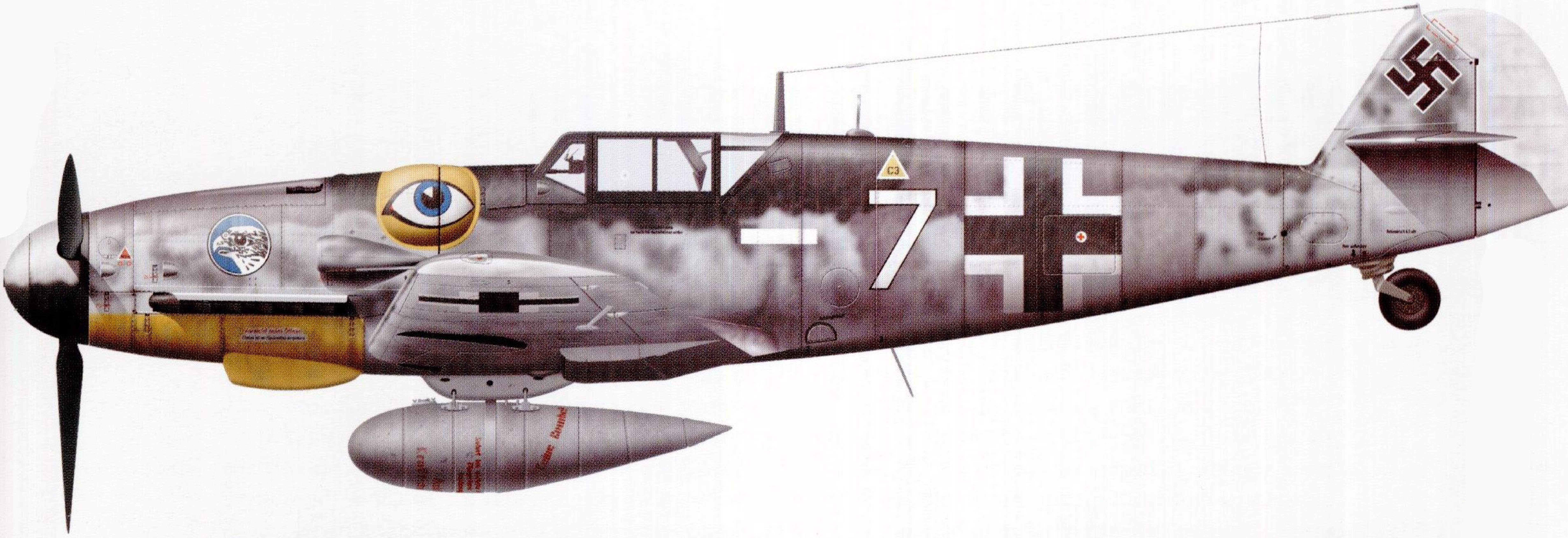


II./JG 77 Badge

Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Yellow 1' of 6./JG 77, Summer 1944

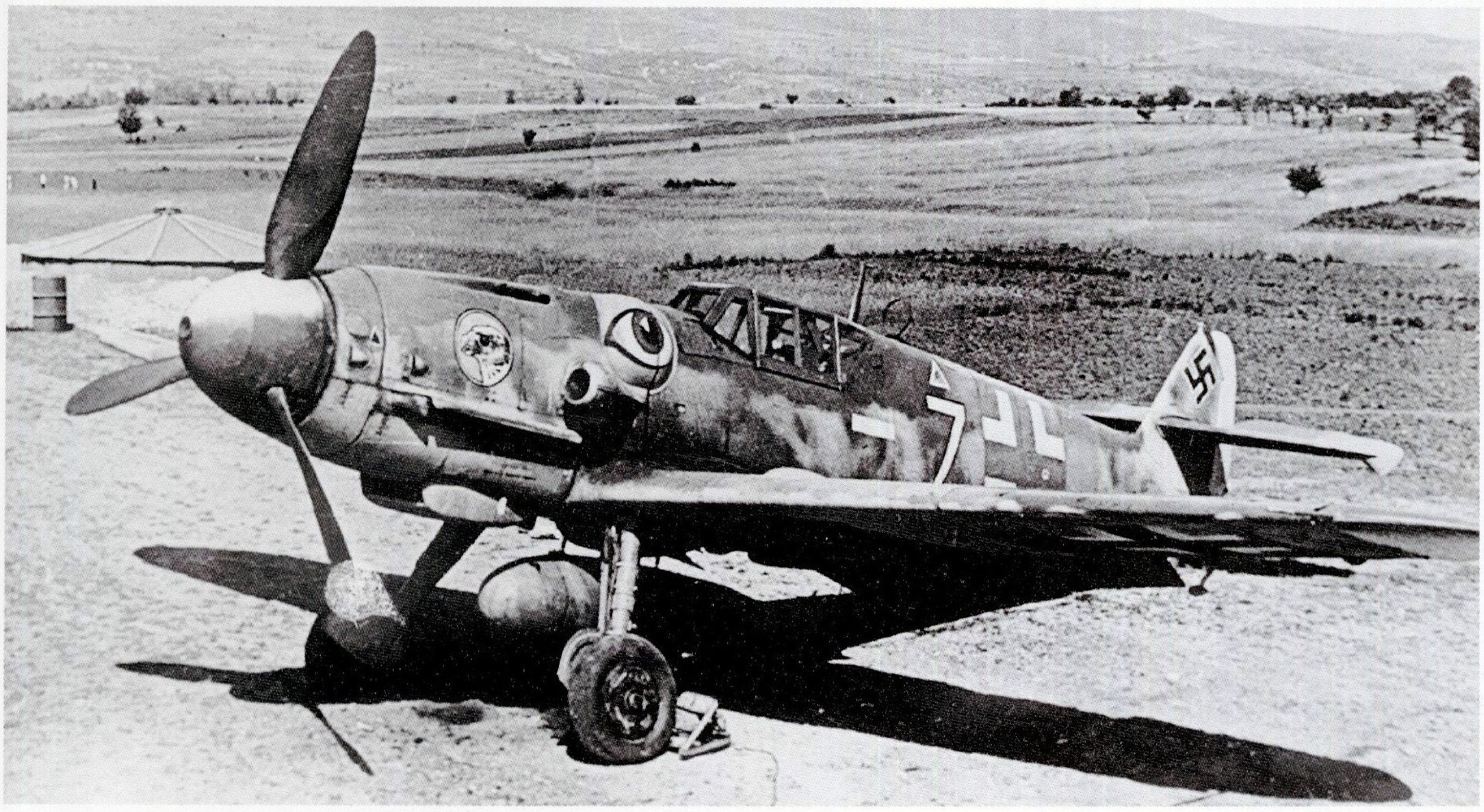
'Yellow 1' was finished in standard RLM 75/75/76 camouflage with particularly small mottles on the fuselage sides. The spinner had a tight, white spiral over the standard RLM 70 green and, in addition to the 'Ace of Hearts' badge of JG 77 on the nose, the II. Gruppe badge had been applied to the fuselage side. Although covered in the accompanying photograph, the width and position of the white fuselage band are believed to be accurate.

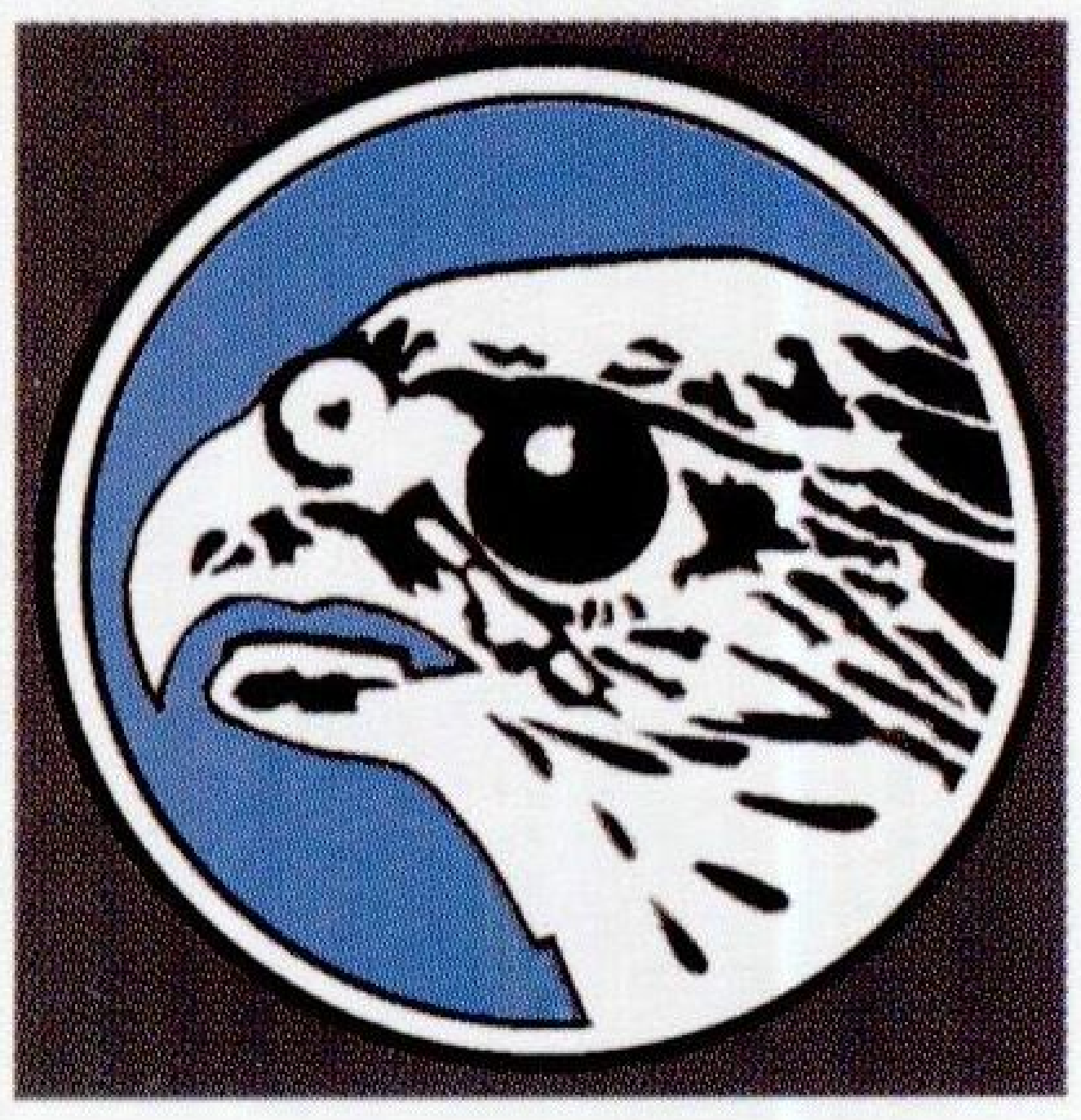




Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'White 7', W.Nr. 163269, flown by Lt. Elias Kühlein of II./JG 51, Radomir, June 1944

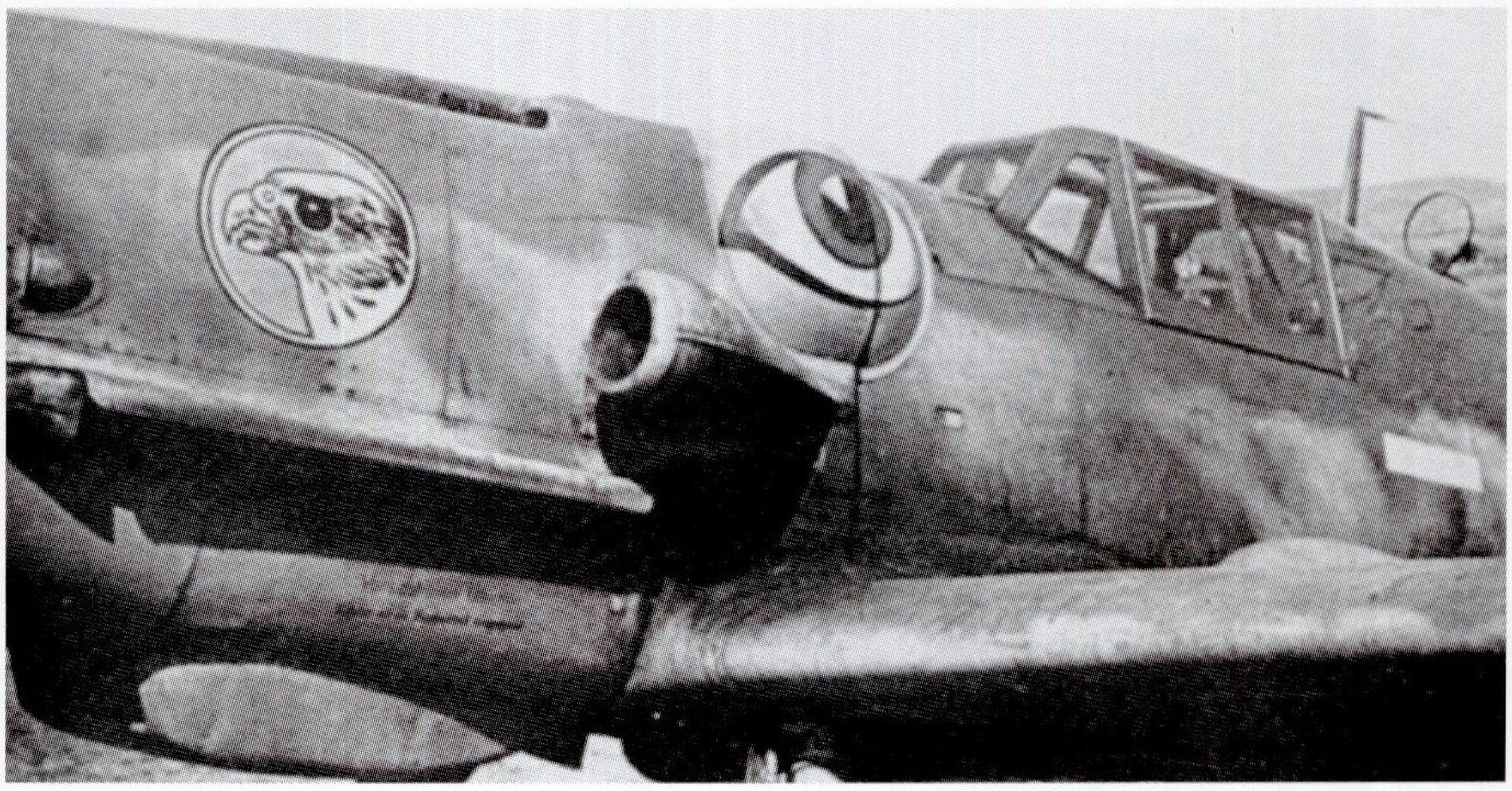
Adorned with a large eye on each of the blisters for the fuselage-mounted MG 131 machine guns, this aircraft was finished in standard RLM 74 and 75 uppersurfaces with RLM 76 undersurfaces. The rudder was painted white and a horizontal white Gruppe bar, typical of JG 51, appeared ahead of the fuselage number. Note the soft edge to the white segment on the propeller spinner, the dark grey centres to the fuselage Balkenkreuze and the area immediately aft of this where a fuselage band has been painted out. Note also that while this aircraft carried the badge of JG 51 'Mölders' on the port side of the engine cowling, the identical area on the starboard side was occupied by the badge of II./JG 51.





JG 51 Badge

ABOVE AND RIGHT: The bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force based in southern Italy frequently flew over the Balkans to attack such targets as the aircraft factories at Wiener-Neustadt in Austria and the Ploesti oilfields in Rumania. In order to intercept the bombers before they reached their targets, II./JG 51 was based at Nisch in Yugoslavia, but as this airfield was frequently attacked, the unit sometimes moved to other locations. This photograph was taken at Radomir in Bulgaria in June 1944 and shows the Bf 109 G-6 flown by Lt. Elias Kühlein of II./JG 51 which featured a large eye painted on the gun blisters and shown in greater detail (*RIGHT*). Kühlein ended the war as Kapitän of 6./JG 51 and was credited with about 35 victories.

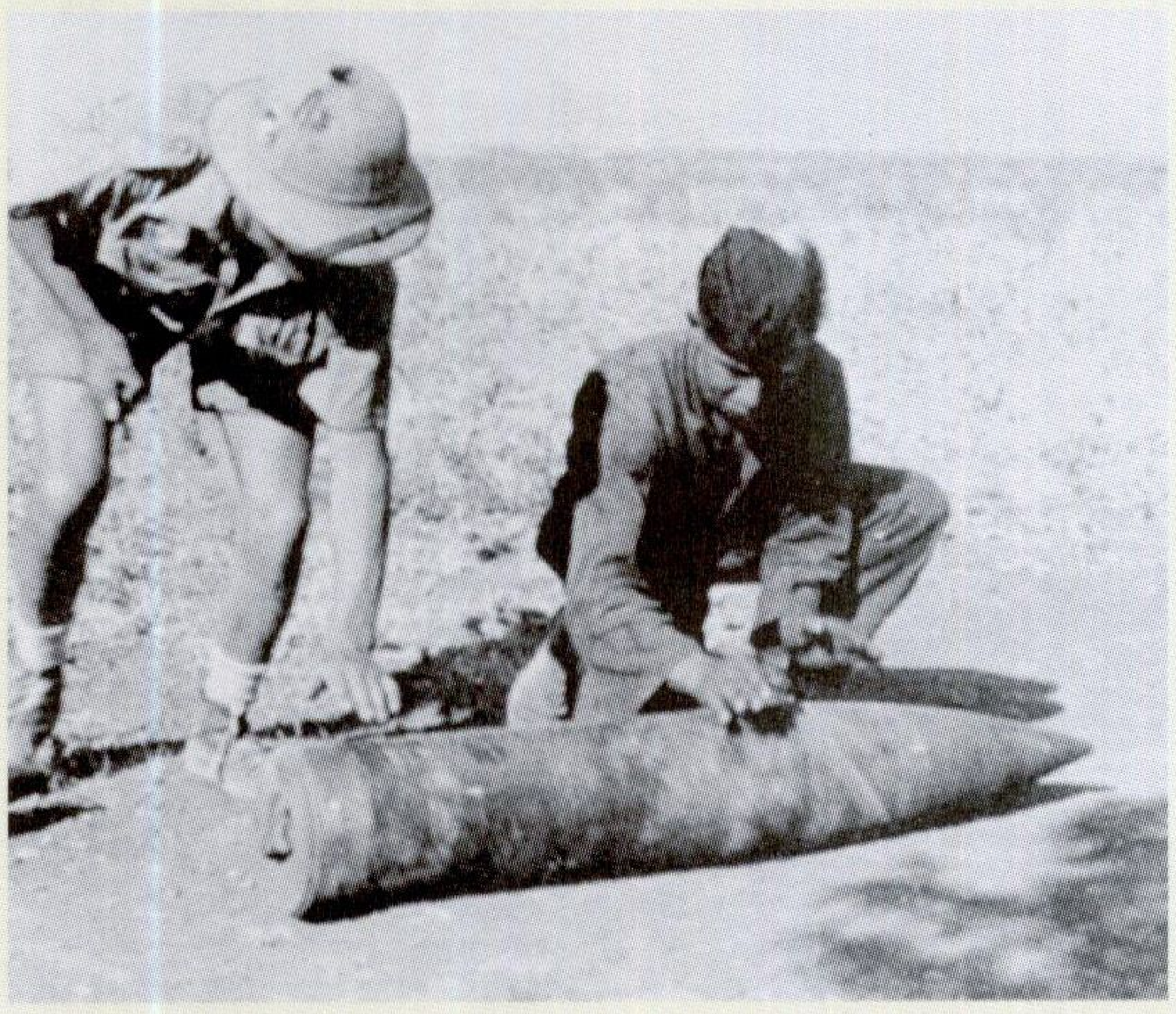


Mortar Armament on German Fighters

Owing to the dangerous concentration of fire from a close formation of heavy bombers, it was necessary for fighters to find some means of breaking up the formation from a point outside the effective range of the bombers' ·5 inch machine guns, and the use of mortar installations on German fighters was developed chiefly to provide such a means.

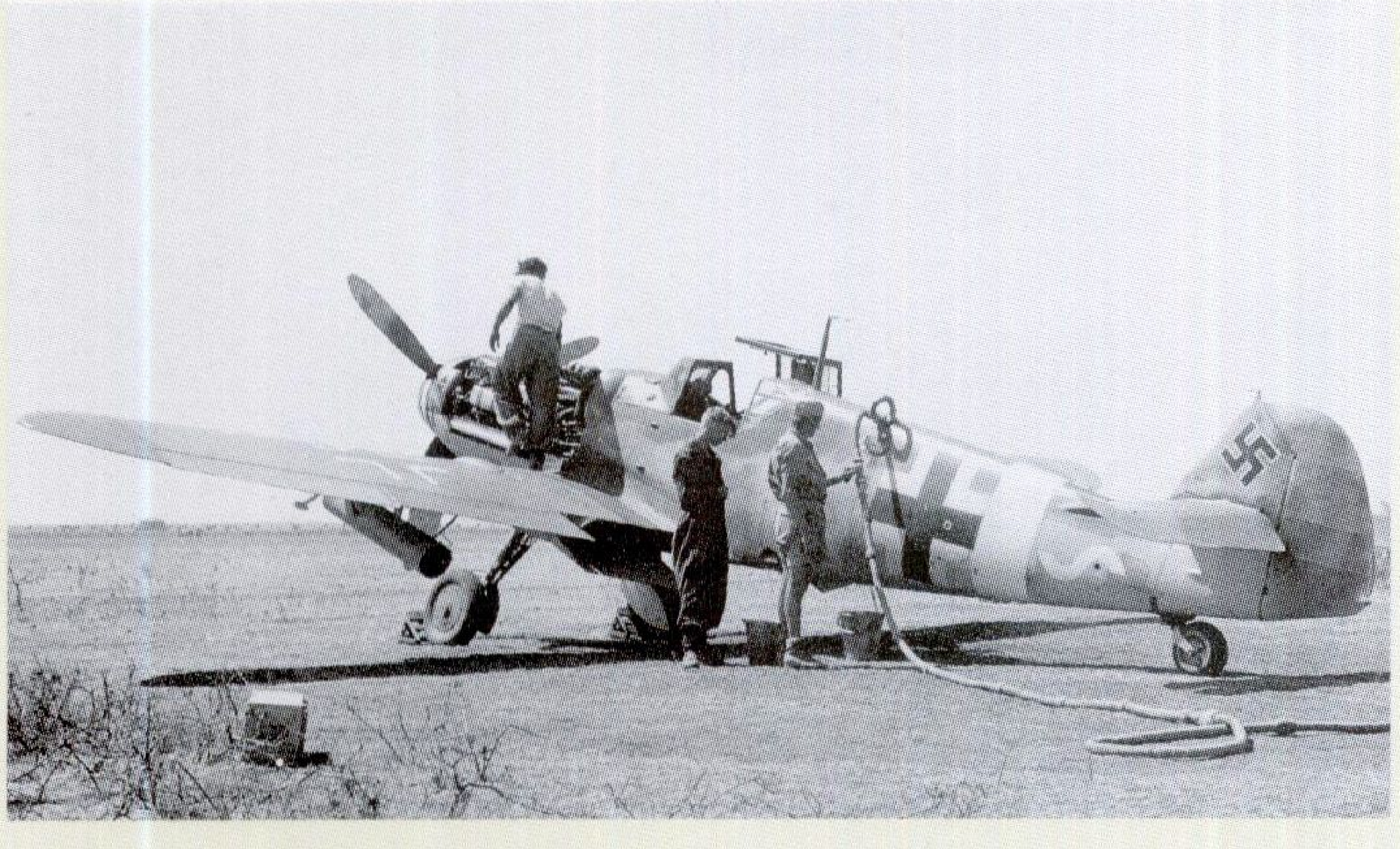
During the Second World War, the designers of fighter aircraft were faced with the choice of mounting either heavy machine guns, or cannon, with an effective range of over 1,000 yards, or installing some sort of mortar projectile with a similar range. The main advantage of mortar projectiles over heavy machine guns was the lightness of the mortar installation, the absence of heavy recoil, which would necessitate substantial construction and mountings in the case of heavy machine guns and the fact that the mortar also had a much greater lethal area of burst. The disadvantages were aiming difficulties, owing partly to the different trajectory and partly to inaccuracies introduced by the mortar projectile itself; the very limited number of rounds which could be carried in a mortar installation as compared with a heavy machine gun; and the drag produced by the equipment. Nevertheless, the mortar projectile appeared to offer rather attractive prospects for attacking bomber formations.

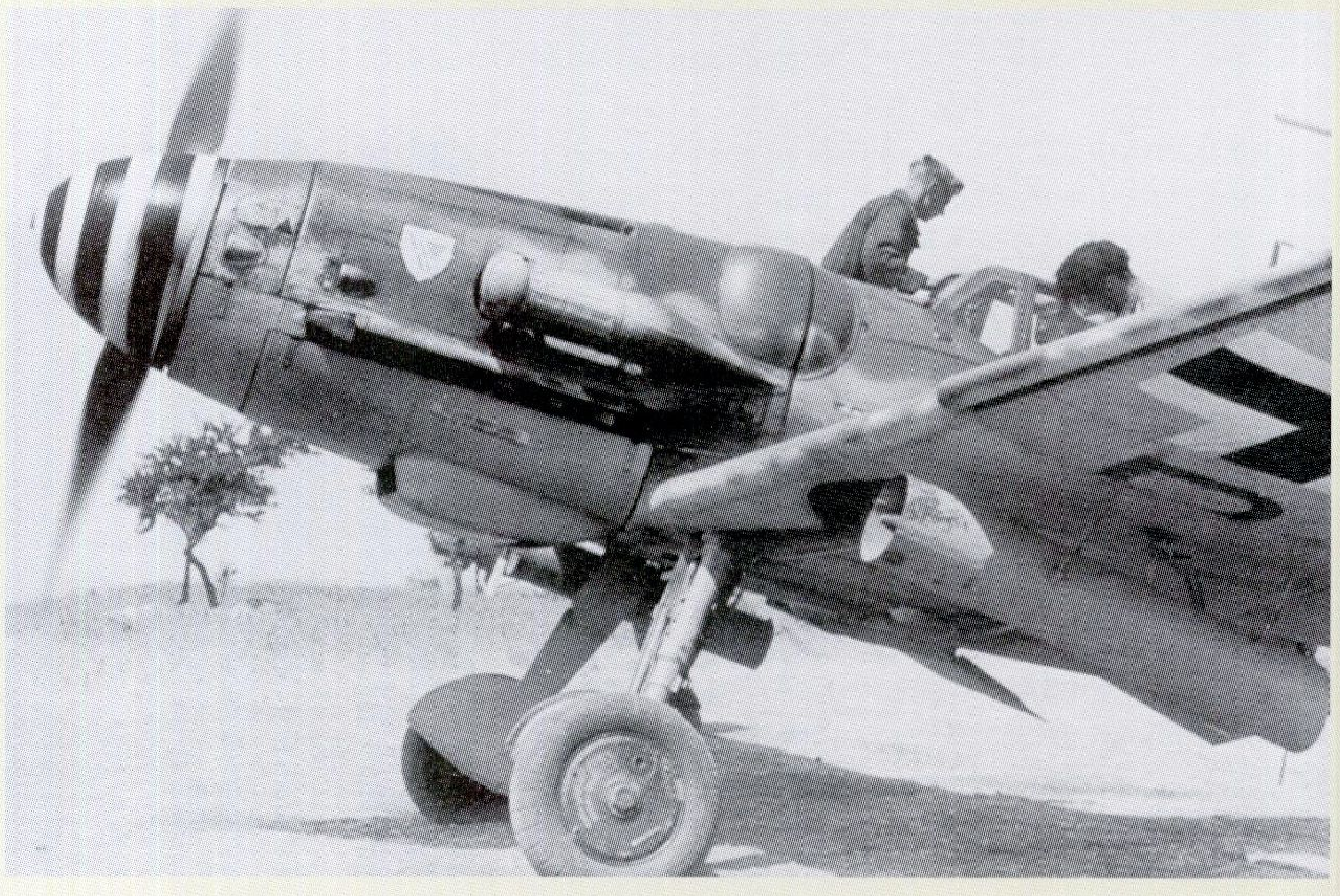
Each 21 cm *Wurfgranate* 42, or Type 42 mortar shell, (*BELOW*) had an 8 lb high-explosive charge and was fitted with a time fuse which made accurate range estimation essential. The mortar was fired by means of a button situated in the handgrip of the control column and should have been used from a range of approximately 1,000 yards, which was still sufficient to enable the fighter to remain beyond the range of the bomber formation's machine guns. While a direct hit had devastating effects, the blast from even a near miss was sufficient to break up bomber formations. Therefore, when IV./JG 3 first arrived in the Mediterranean theatre with some of its aircraft equipped with 21 cm mortar tubes, hopes were high that this new *'Dödelgerät'* would prove effective especially since, for the award of decorations, the system had been amended so that a four-engined bomber counted as three victories and a twin-engined aircraft as two victories.



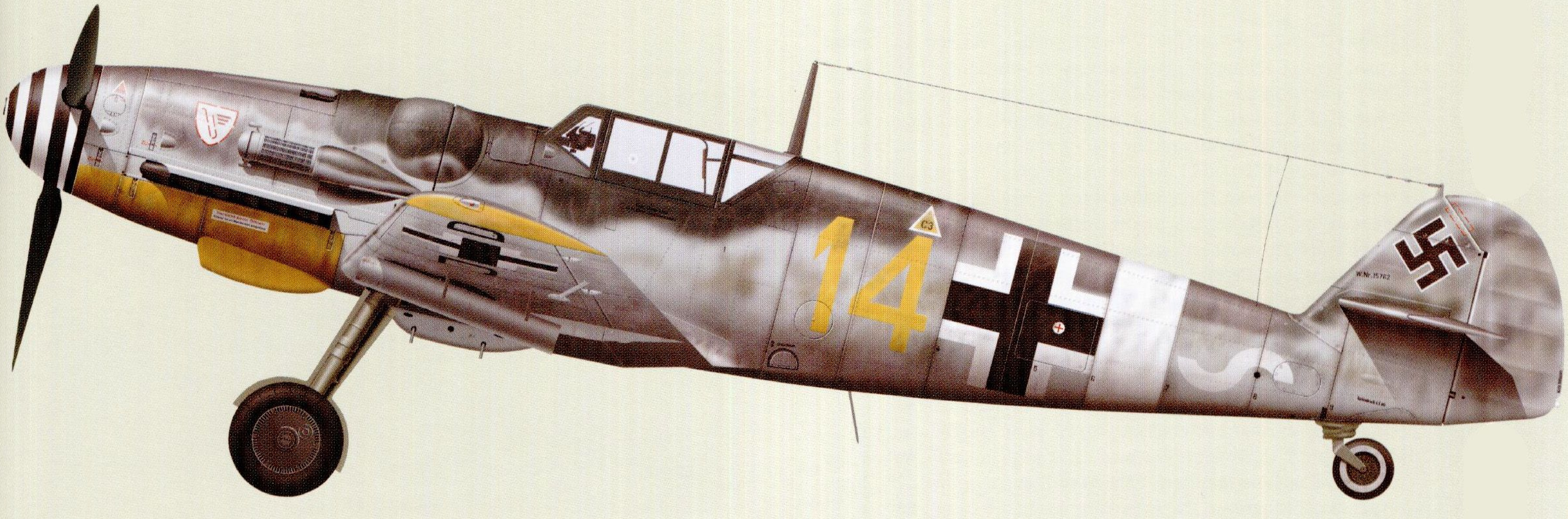
In the event, the mortar tubes did not prove as effective as had been hoped, largely, it seems, because the great weight of the mortars prevented the fighters from attaining a favourable launching position with the result that the larger percentage of mortars were fired from too great a range. In addition, the tubes severely limited manoeuvrability and performance in airspace where the enemy had air superiority.

This following series of photographs shows 'Yellow 14', a Bf 109 G-6 trop of *Lt.* Herbert Kutscha's 12./JG 3 being readied for a mission. Kutscha, (*RIGHT*) pictured here in 1942 when he belonged to 5./ZG 1, was a *Ritterkreuzträger* with 24 victories, and when 12./JG 3 first arrived in the theatre at the end of June 1943 the *Staffel* was based at Leverano in southern Italy. Heavy bombing of this airfield eventually forced the unit to move approximately 300 km north-westwards to San Severo in July, where the accompanying photographs were taken the following month.



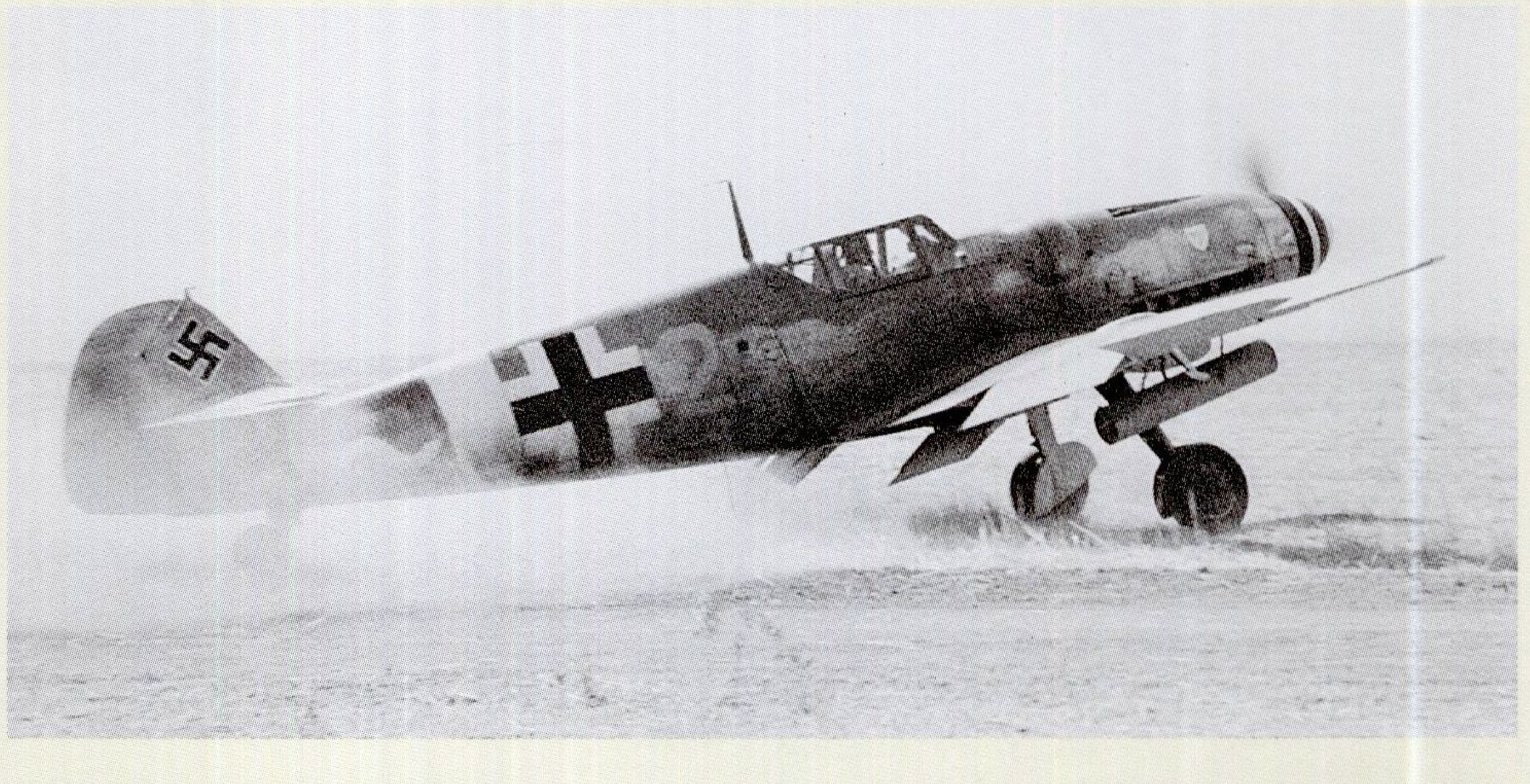


Once armed, the 400 litre fuselage fuel tank of 'Yellow 14' is refilled (*ABOVE*) and the engine started (*RIGHT*). The full Stammkennzeichen and Werk Nummer of this machine are believed to have been RH+JD, which was retained below the wings, and 15762 respectively.

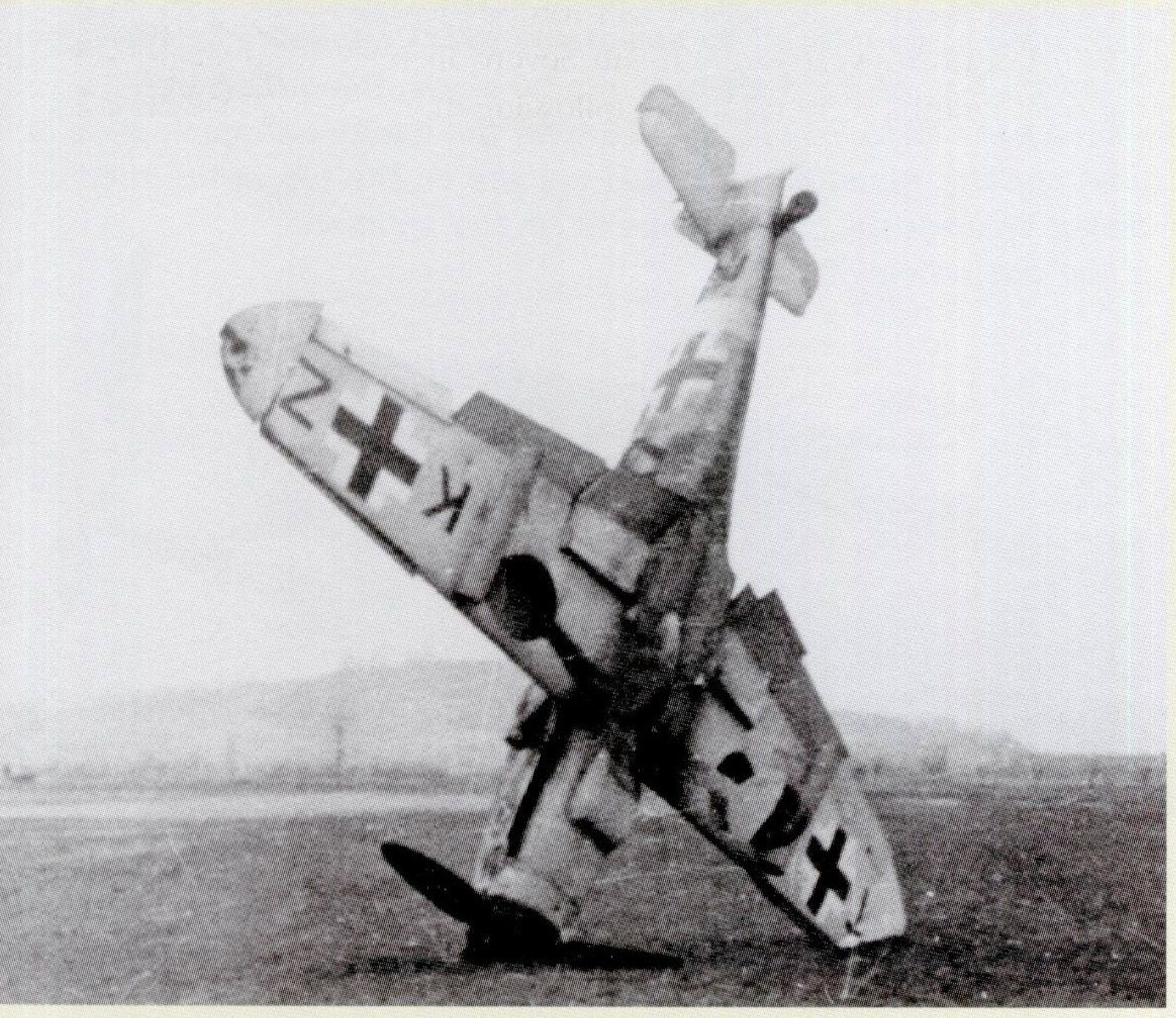


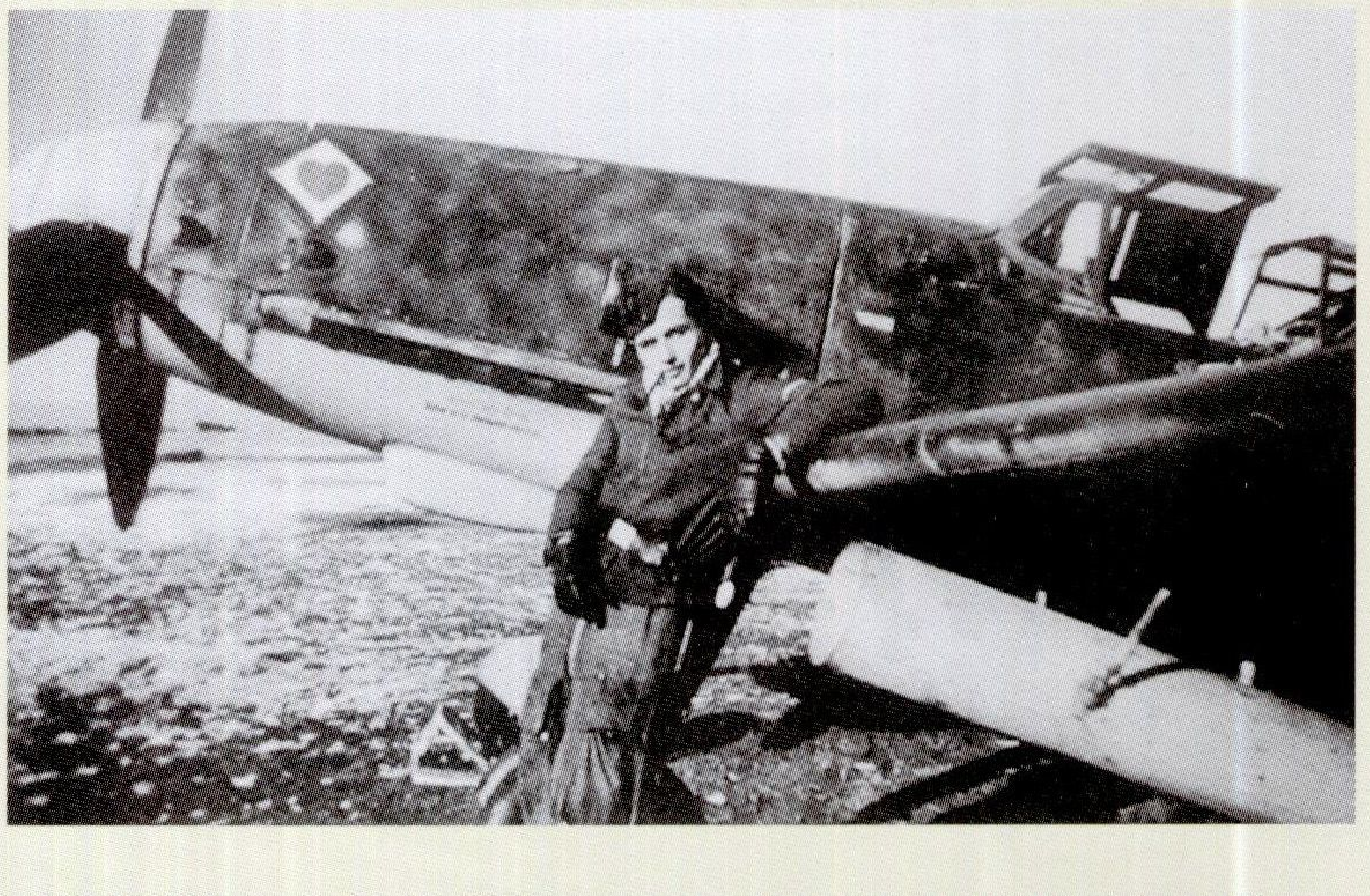
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 'Yellow 14', W.Nr. 15762, of 12./JG 3, San Severo, Italy, August 1943
As with the majority of aircraft illustrated in this title, this machine was again finished in the standard grey RLM 74 and 75 uppersurfaces and RLM 76 undersurfaces of the time. While the white spiral spinner design was usually applied over the standard RLM 70, on this aircraft it appears to have been applied in black and white. A small representation of the winged 'U' badge of JG 3, the 'Udet' Geschwader, appeared on the engine cowling and the panel under the engine was yellow. The fuselage number was not outlined in a contrasting colour and, although a white band has been applied to the rear fuselage, the wingtips are yellow as opposed to the usual white for the Mediterranean theatre. The Gruppe symbol employed by IV./JG 3 at this time had been applied by using one half of the usual III. Gruppe wavy bar stencil and was in weathered white. The full Stammkennzeichen, which appeared under the wings, is thought to have been RH+JD and the Wk.Nr. 15762.

RIGHT: Another mortar-armed Bf 109 G-6 trop aircraft of 12./JG 3 photographed taxiing at San Severo in August 1943 was this 'Yellow 2'. With the obvious exception of the individual aircraft number, the camouflage and markings on this machine were almost the same as on the previously shown 'Yellow 14'. Note the wavy bar behind the fuselage Balkenkreuz on both machines which identified aircraft belonging to the III. Gruppe, which at this time consisted of four Staffeln. In an emergency, both firing tubes could be jettisoned in flight.



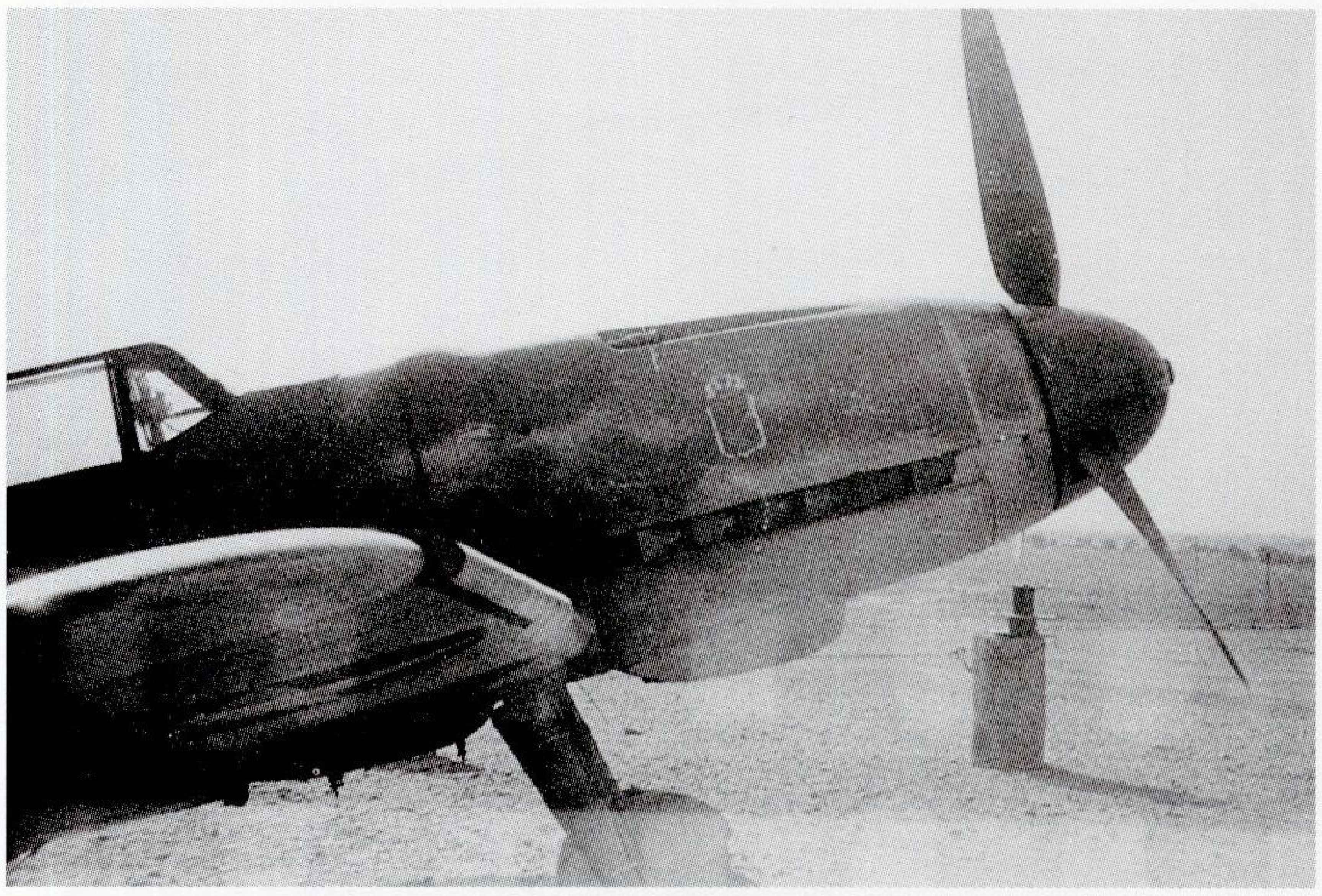
BELOW: Other units in the theatre employing Bf 109s equipped with 21 cm mortar tubes were parts of JG 53 and JG 77. This photograph shows 'Black 17' of 2./JG 53 after a landing accident at Maniago in February 1944. The aircraft is a Bf 109 G-6 and retained the Stammkennzeichen TV+KZ under the wings.

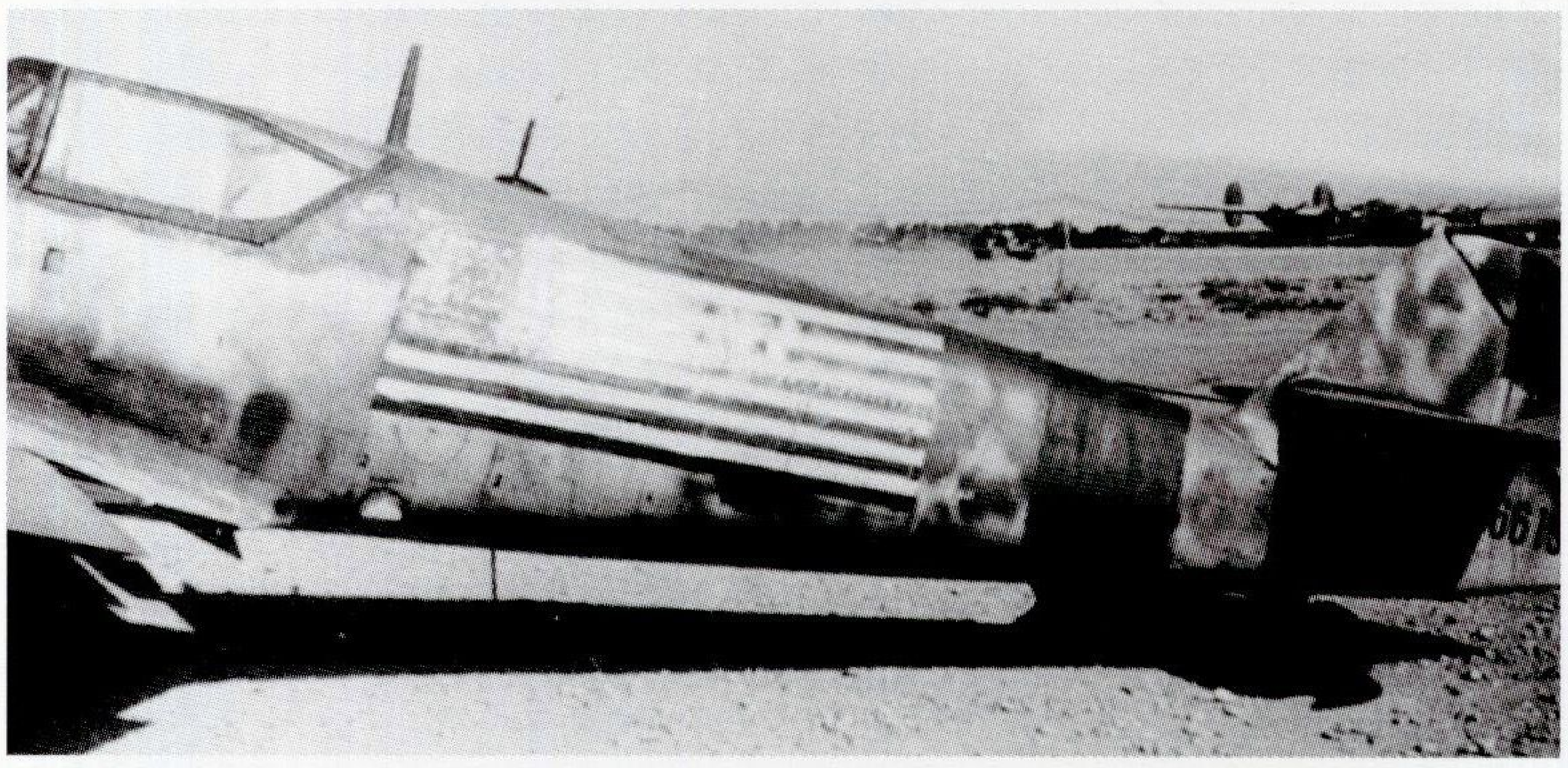


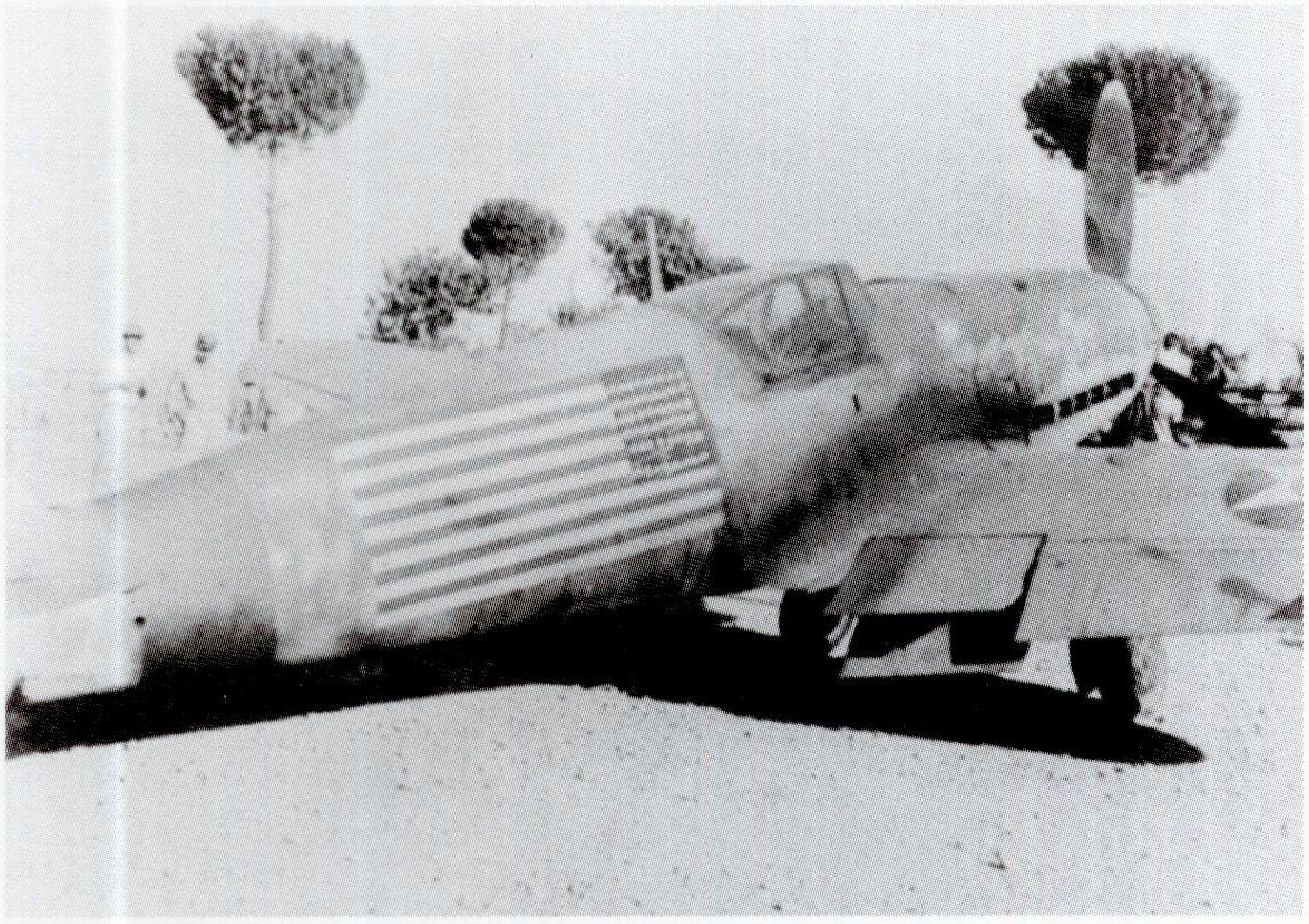


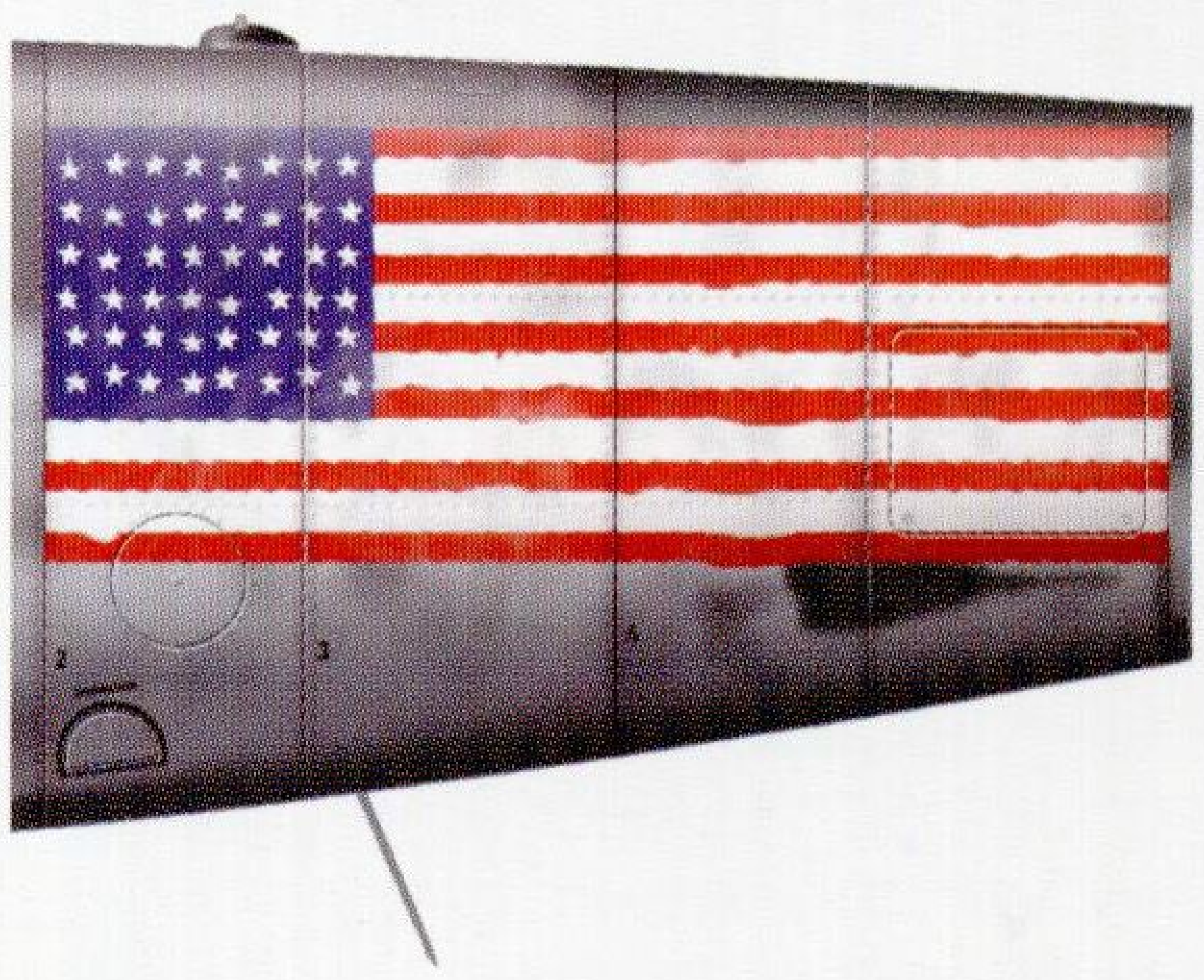
ABOVE: Uffz. Hacker of 8./JG 77 with one of the Staffel's Bf 109 G-2 aircraft fitted with mortar launching tubes. Note the unusually dense mottle on the fuselage – presumably dark green over sand – and the position of the 'Wander - Zircus Ubben badge, just visible below the cockpit. The III./JG 77 transferred from Italy to to Rumania in October 1943, this photograph being taken at Mizil in early 1944.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: When Rumania declared war on its German ally on 25 August 1944, there were more than 1,000 Allied PoWs detained in the country. To avoid these prisoners falling into the hands of the Soviet Army, the senior US PoW, Lt. Col. James A. Gunn, was granted permission by the new Rumanian government to radio Fifteenth Air Force in Italy to arrange their repatriation. However, Fifteenth Air Force refused to discuss the matter by radio and Gunn was requested to report personally to Italy. His first attempt failed as his aircraft lacked adequate range, but as Captain Prince Constantin Cantacuzino, a well-known Rumanian civil and military pilot, was also flying to Italy to convey the Rumanian peace terms, he offered to take Gunn with him in his Bf 109 G-6. With the Rumanian national markings overpainted and replaced with crude US insignia, the flight was made on the 27th with Cantacuzino flying and Gunn in the radio compartment in the fuselage. These photographs show the aircraft employed, W.Nr. 166133, formerly 'Red 31' of Grupul 9 vânătoare, after landing at San Giovanni, one of the airfields at Foggia, in southern Italy. Note that the spinner has been overpainted, probably at the same time as the US insignia were applied and that this aircraft has been fitted with the Vollsichtkabine, or full vision canopy, commonly known as the Erla Haube. Behind the Erla canopy was a short radio mast and a loop aerial, with a further antenna under the fuselage and a Morane mast under the port wing.

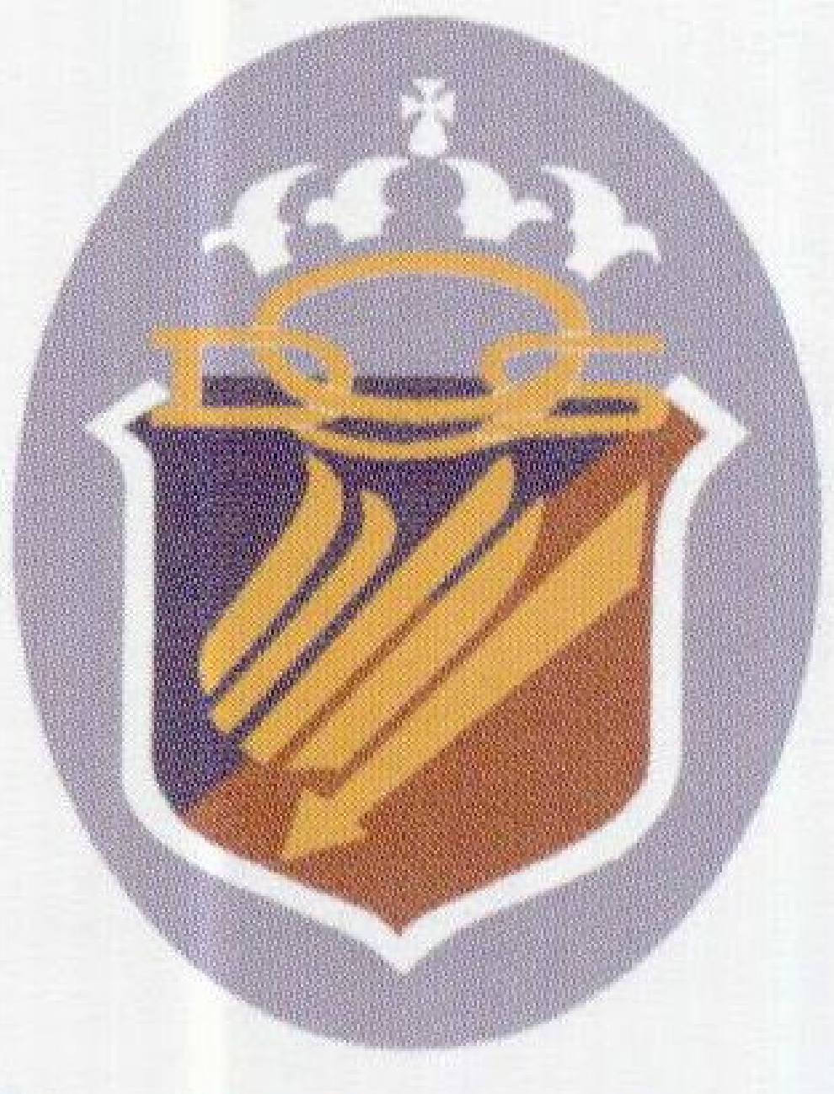








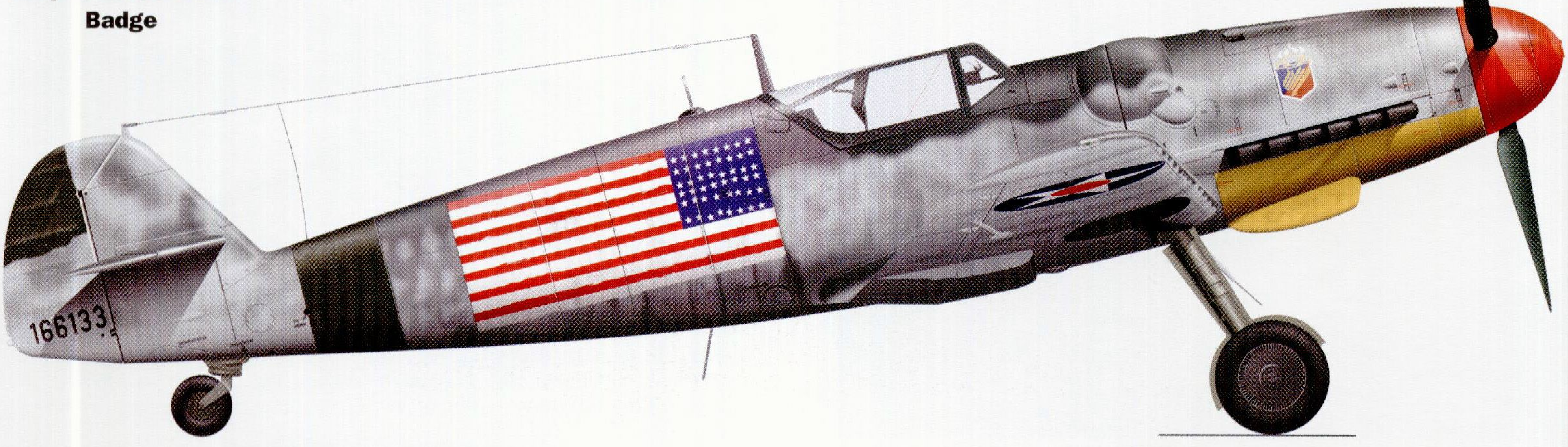
LEFT: Detail of US flag applied to port side of fuselage



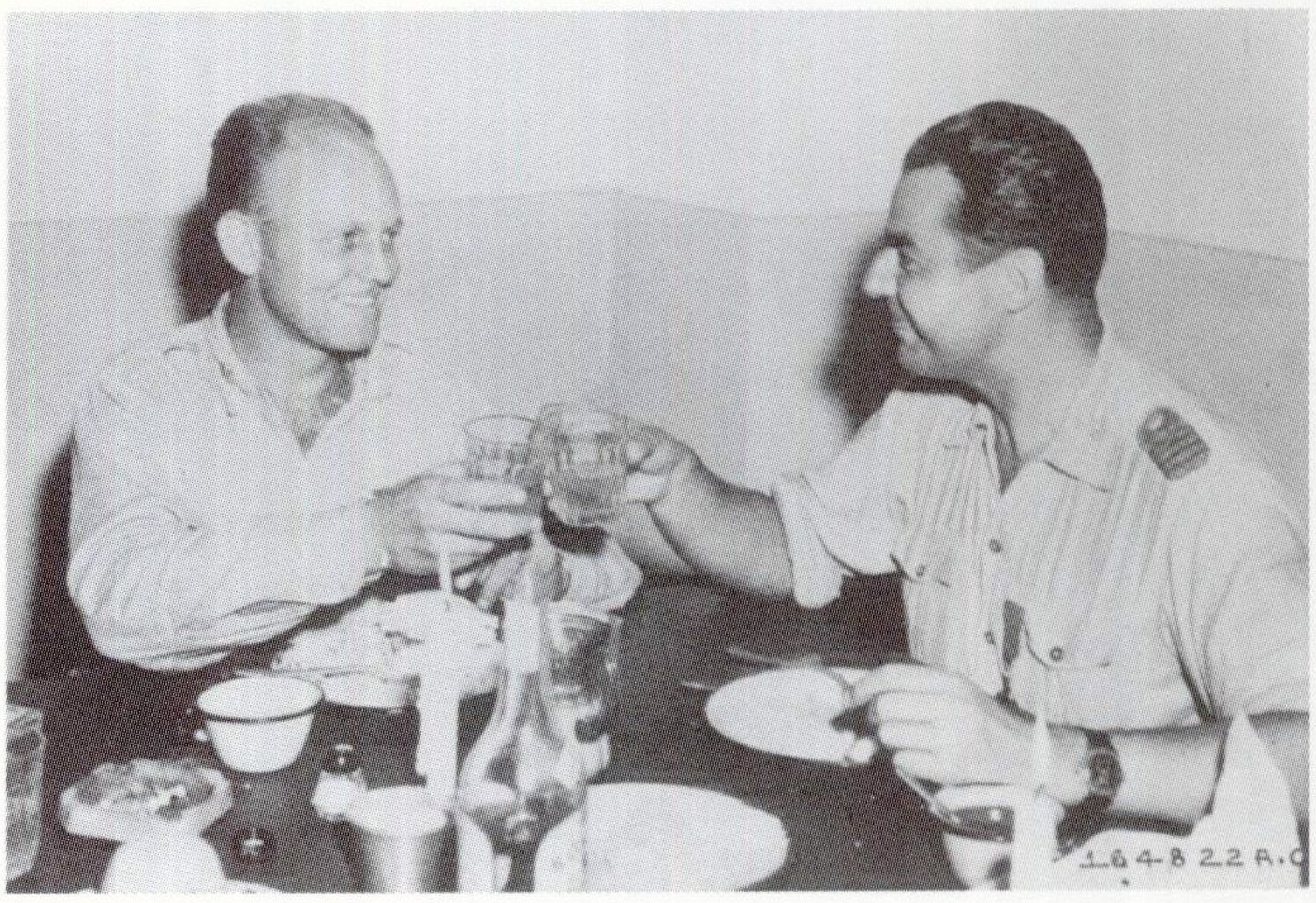
Grupul 9 vânătoare Badge

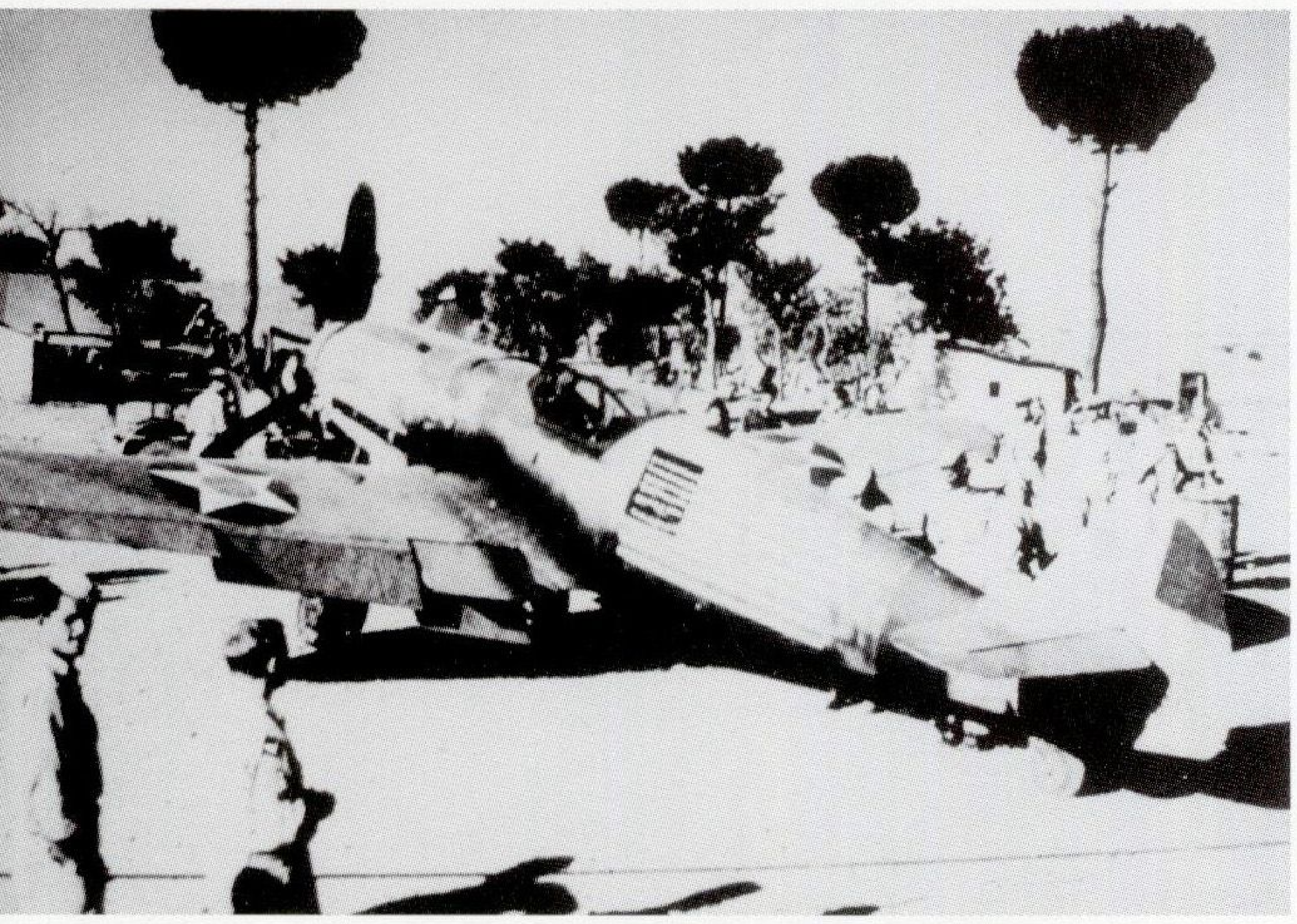
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6, previously 'Red 31' of Grupul 9 vânătoare, San Giovanni, Italy, 27 August 1944

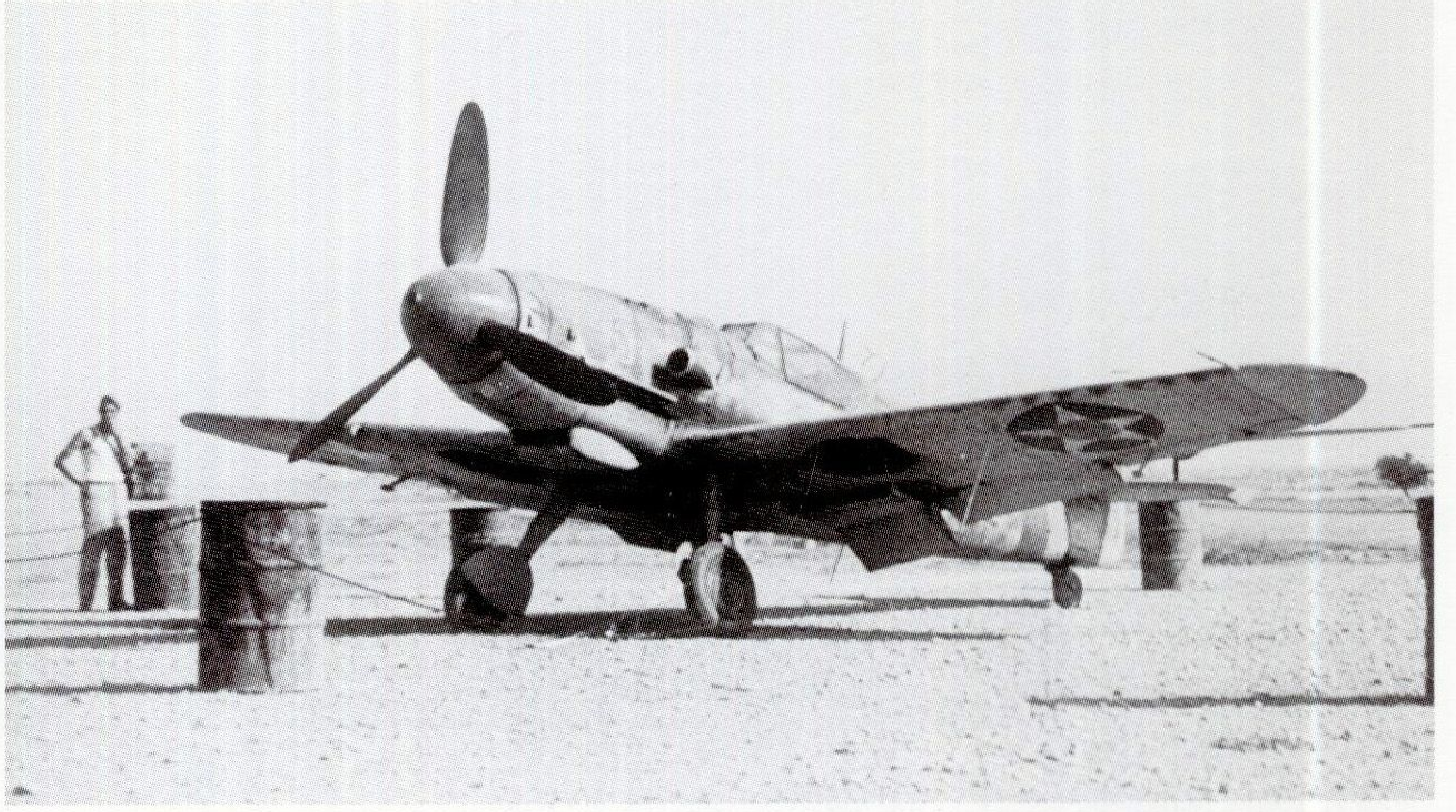
Apart from the unit badge on the engine cowling and the W.Nr. 166133 on the base of the rudder, all original Rumanian markings on this aircraft have been overpainted and replaced by non-standard US markings on the upper and lower surfaces of the wings and a roughly-painted US flag on both sides of the fuselage. Beneath these markings, the camouflage colours are believed to have been RLM 74, 75 and 76 with the additional application of dark green to conceal the previously yellow tail band and the Rumanian national colours on the top of the rudder. Note the trace of the original white spiral still showing through the fresh red paint on the spinner and that the unit badge appeared on both sides of the engine cowling.

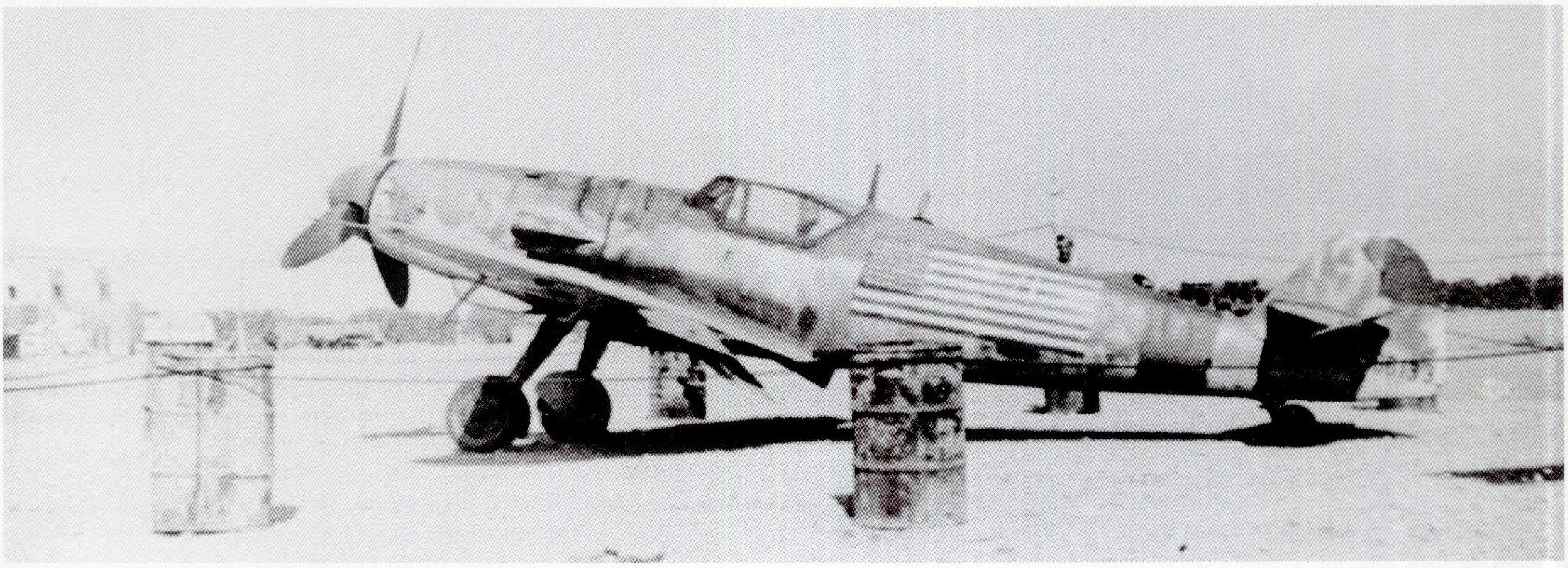


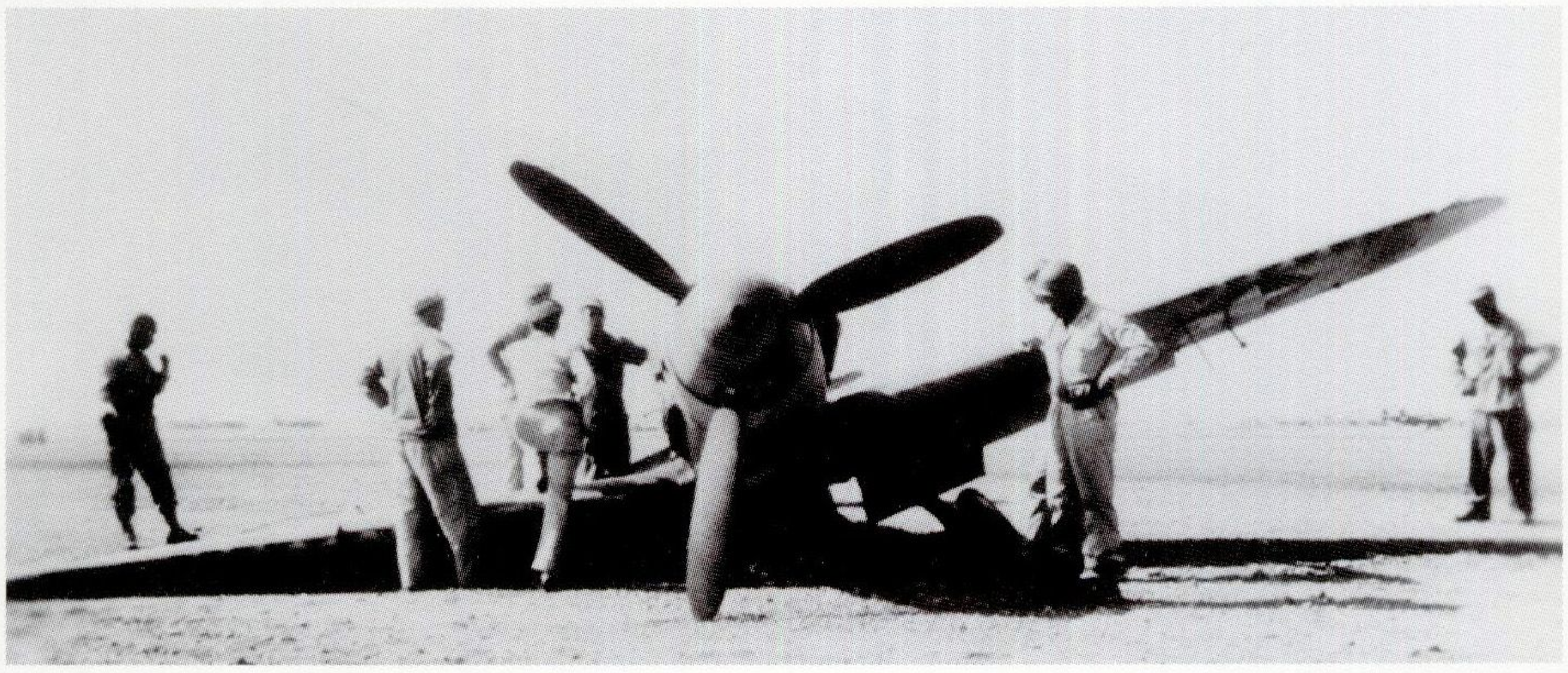
RIGHT: Captain Prince Constantin Cantacuzino (right) and Lt. Col. James A. Gunn toast each other after their successful flight to San Giovanni. Gunn was anxious to fly Cantacuzino's Bf 109 himself, but while attempting to take off on 28 August, the machine ground-looped, causing the starboard undercarriage oleo to collapse *(BOTTOM)*. With his aircraft damaged, Cantacuzino was loaned a Mustang of the US 319th Fighter Squadron and returned to Rumania escorted by three other P-51s which were to carry out a visual survey of Popesti airport to confirm it was suitable for the evacuation of the PoWs. Subsequently, the PoWs were flown to Italy in B-17s specially converted for the purpose and Captain Cantacuzino returned to combat, now flying against the Luftwaffe. By the end of the war he had claimed a total of 69 victories. Post-war, Cantacuzino resumed his career as a commercial pilot but disliked the pro-Communist regime in Rumania and in January 1948, during a flight to Milan, defected to the West. He died in Spain in 1958, aged 53.

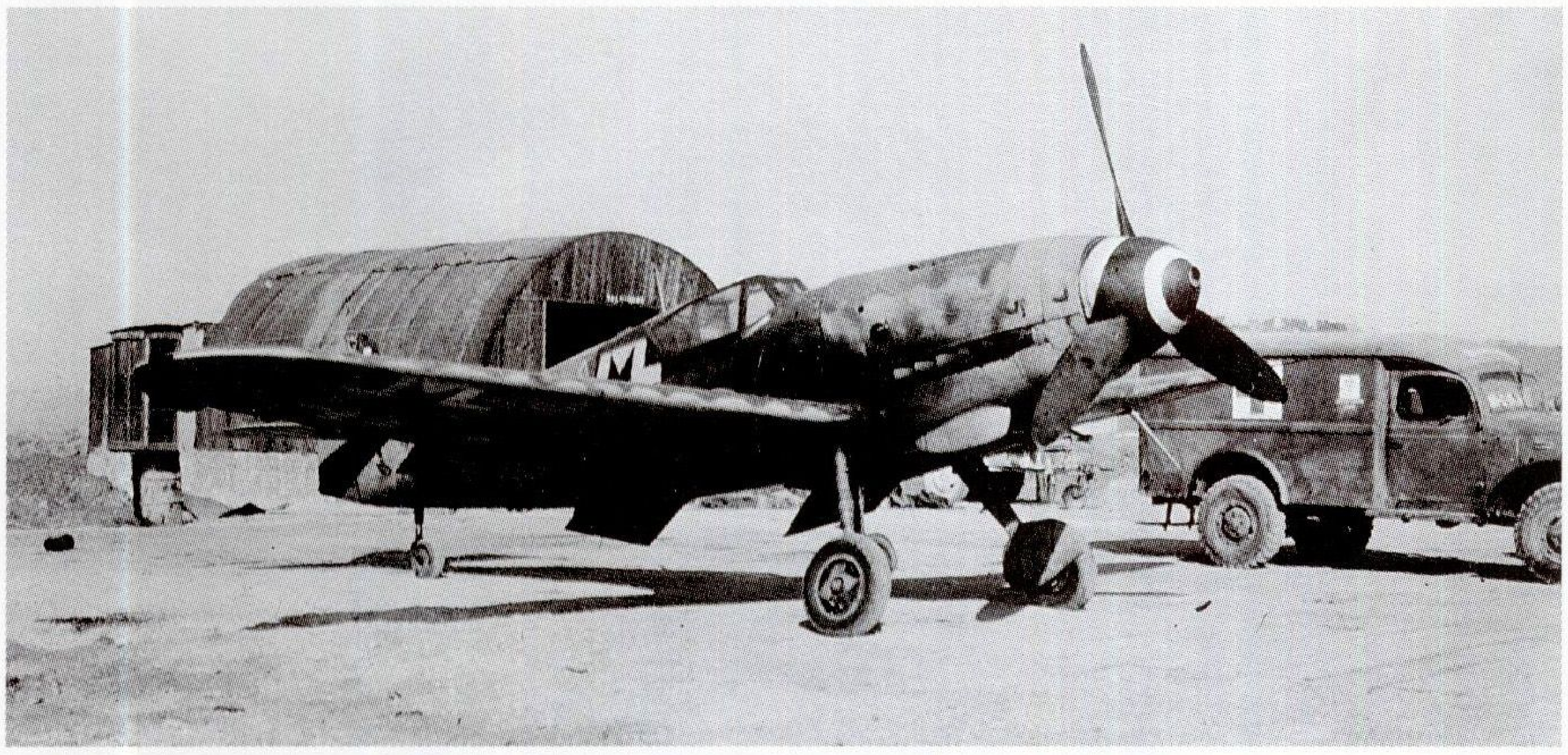




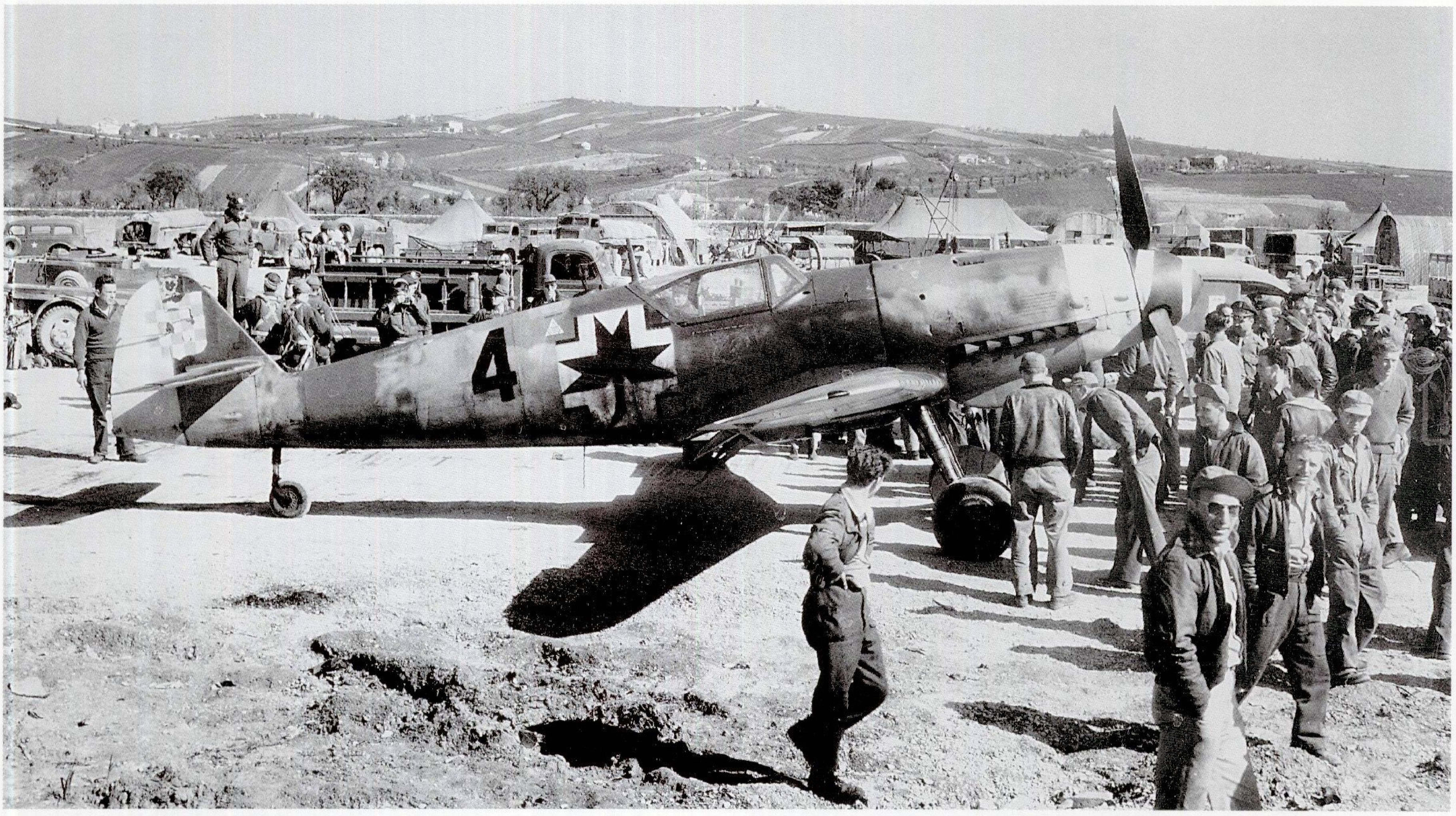






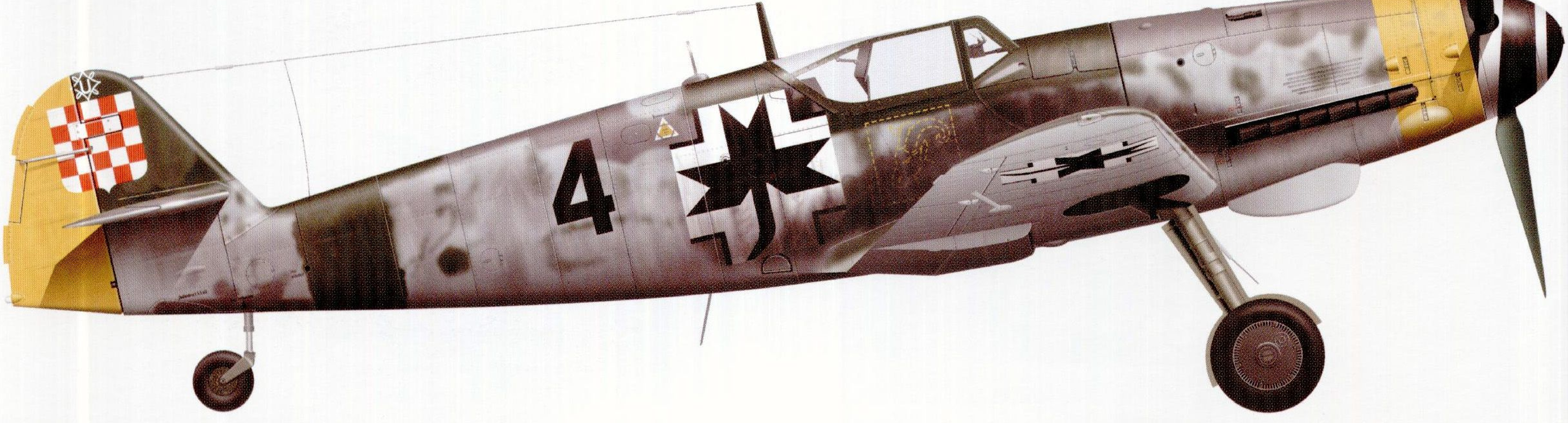


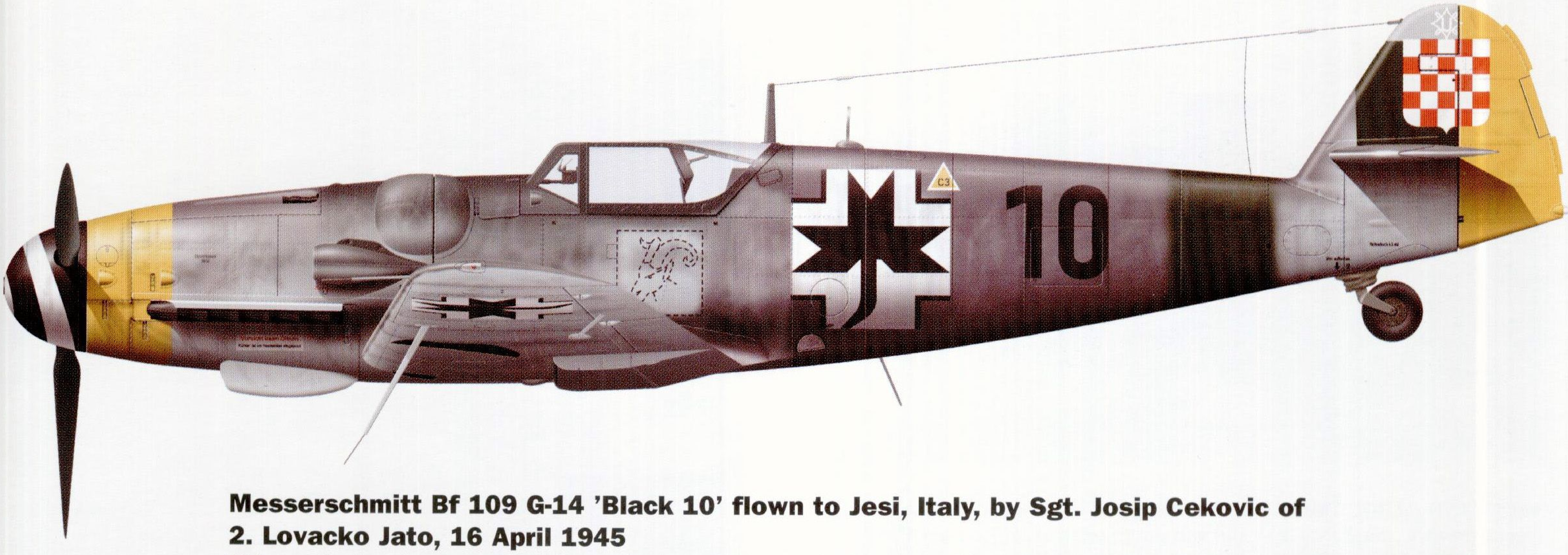
LEFT AND BELOW: On the afternoon of 16 April 1945, four Bf 109s of the 2nd Squadron of the ZNDH – the Zrakoplovstvo Nezavisne Drzave Hrvatske, or Air Force of the Independent State of Croatia – took off from Lucko in Yugoslavia on a reconnaissance mission. Two of the pilots in this formation had already decided to defect to the Allies and, part way through the mission, Sergeants Vladimir Sandtner and Josip Cekovic fell behind the other two aircraft and headed towards Italy. On sighting suitable landing places, each pilot, following a procedure that had been announced in Allied propaganda broadcasts, lowered his undercarriage, rocked his wings and fired flares. The aircraft then landed, Sandtner setting down his Bf 109 G-10 at Falconara, while Cekovic in a Bf 109 G-14 marked 'Black 10', landed at Jesi. This aircraft, 'Black 4', has heavy exhaust staining which has soiled much of the fuselage sides but the badge of the 2. Lovacko Jato below the cockpit – the outline of a ram's head ßwithin a square, both being in broken yellow lines – is still visible below the cockpit.



Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-10 'Black 4' flown to Falconara, Italy, by Sgt. Vladimir Sandtner of 2. Lovacko Jato, 16 April 1945

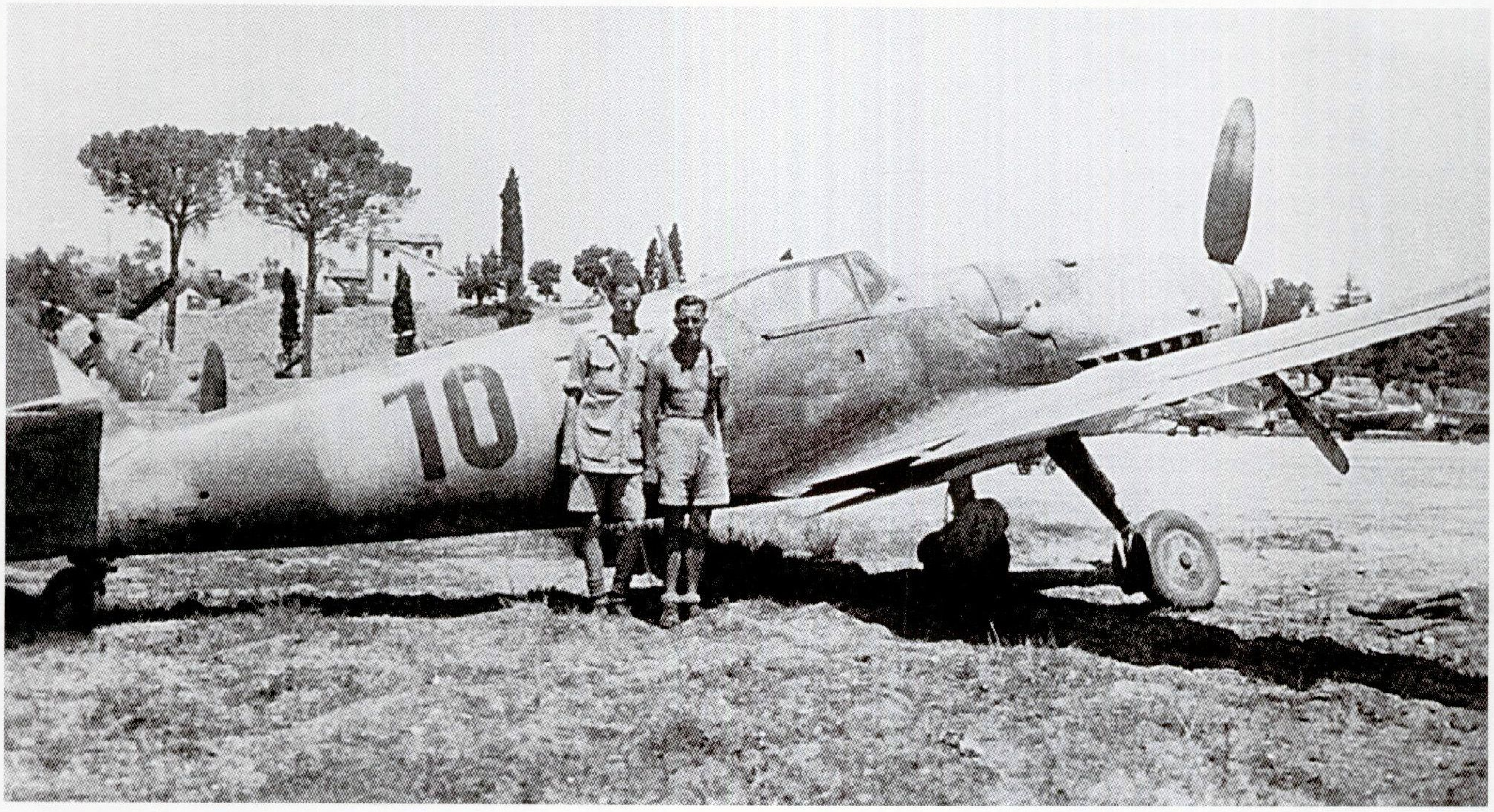
This aircraft is believed to have been finished in the late-war Luftwaffe scheme of RLM 75 grey and dark green RLM 83 on the uppersurfaces with RLM 76 on the undersurfaces. The green areas on the tail and rear fuselage show where the original Luftwaffe markings have been painted out and, in accordance with latest instructions, the yellow panel under the nose has been replaced by a yellow band. Heavy exhaust staining on the fuselage sides has partly obscured the ram's head insignia of 2. Lovacko Jato under the cockpit.



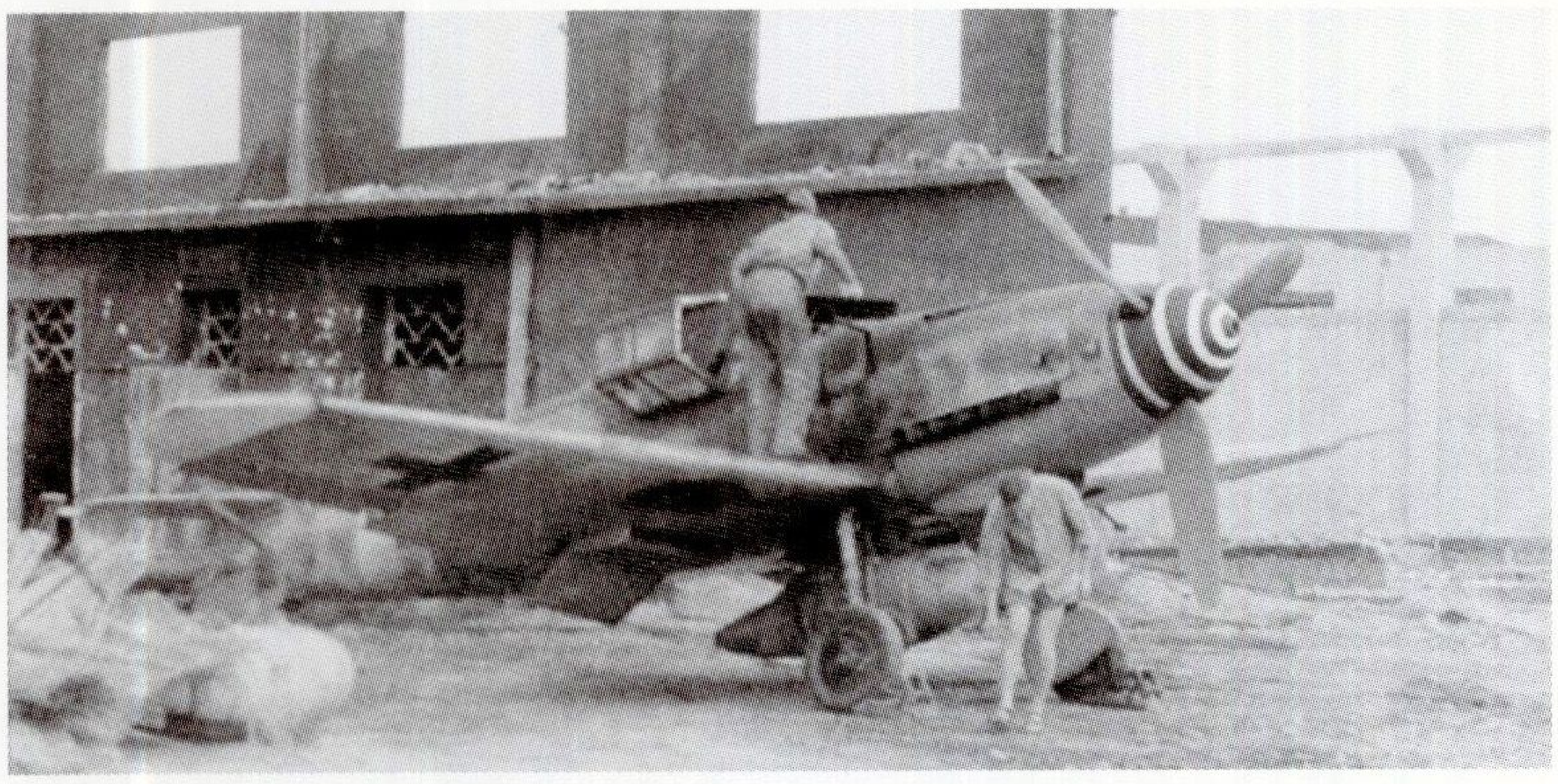


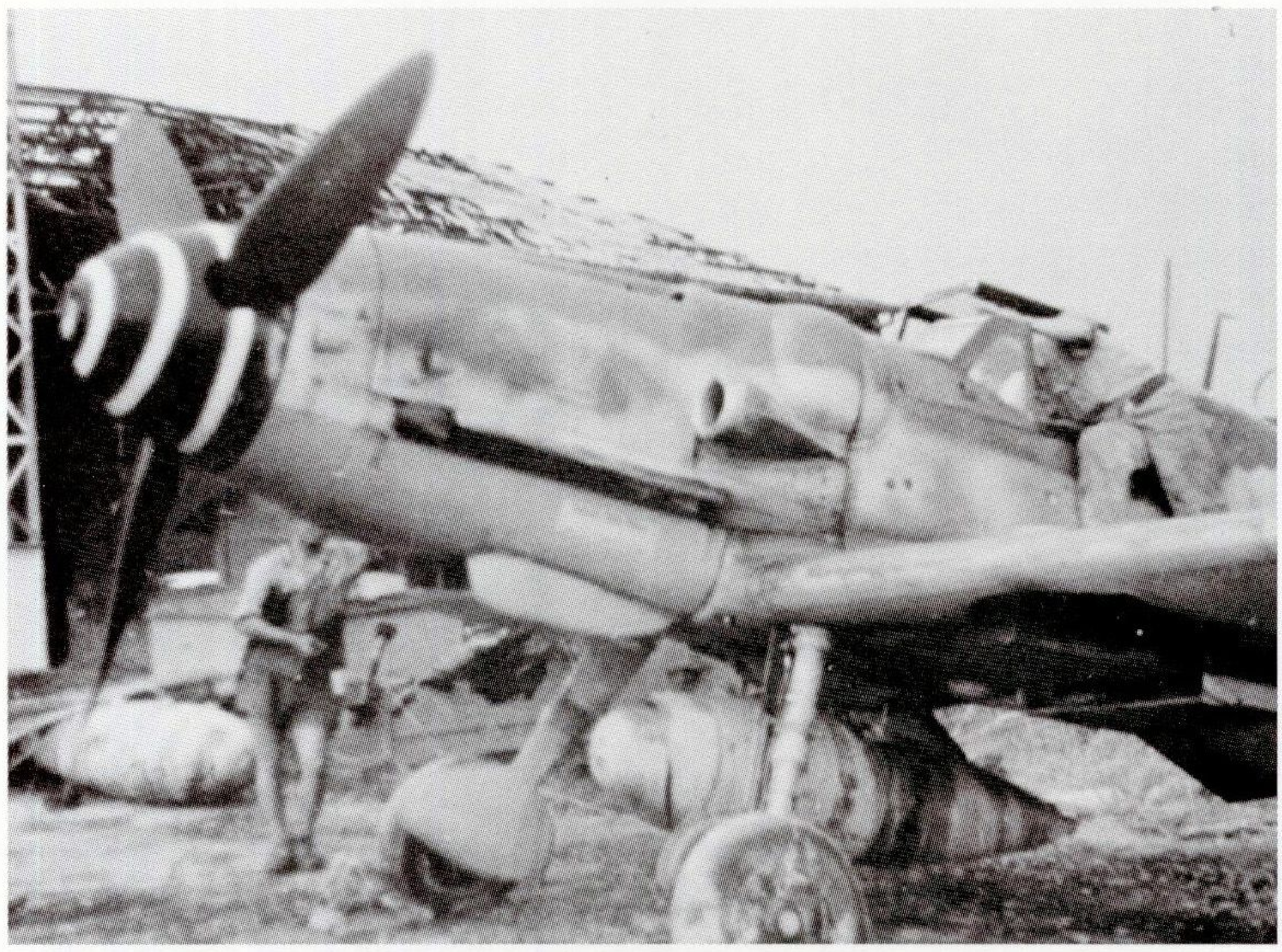
Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-14 'Black 10' flown to Jesi, Italy, by Sgt. Josip Cekovic of 2. Lovacko Jato, 16 April 1945

This profile has been created from the two photographs below and is believed to be a fairly accurate representation of the aircraft's port side, and although not all of the machine is visible, it was clearly fitted with the early type of blisters over the fuselage guns as opposed to the later more streamlined fairing. The overall uppersurface camouflage is believed to have been the grey and green scheme consisting of RLM 75 and 83 with undersurfaces in RLM 76. Note that on this aircraft the unit's ram's head badge appears in black and has been applied only to the port side.

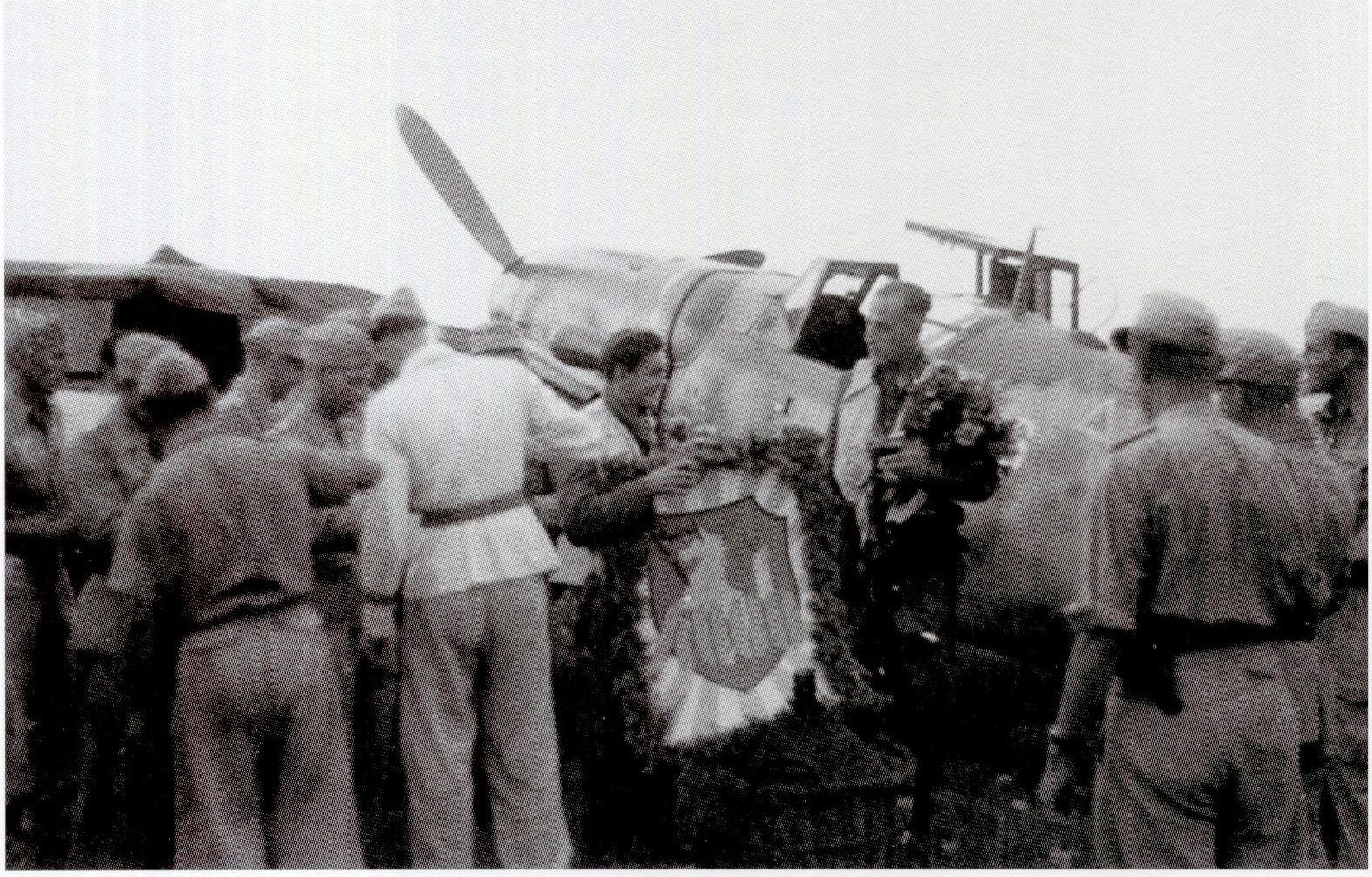


ABOVE AND RIGHT: Despite its numerical sequence, the Bf 109 G-14 appeared earlier than the Bf 109 G-10 featured opposite. These two photographs show Sgt. Josip Cekovic's Bf 109 G-14 'Black 10' after it had landed at Jesi on 16 April 1945. The camouflage and markings are similar to 'Black 4' and clearly show where earlier Luftwaffe markings, including a yellow rear fuselage band, have been overpainted. An interesting feature on this machine was that, although the ram's head badge of the 2. Lovacko Jato appeared beneath the cockpit on the port side, it was in black outline and appeared within a square lighter than the surrounding area where the fuselage had been cleaned of the exhaust deposit prior to application. A similar cleaned area also appeared on the starboard side of the fuselage, but in this instance the ram's head badge had not yet been applied. Note that in the view (*RIGHT*) the Croat insignia on the fuselage has now been replaced by an RAF roundel.

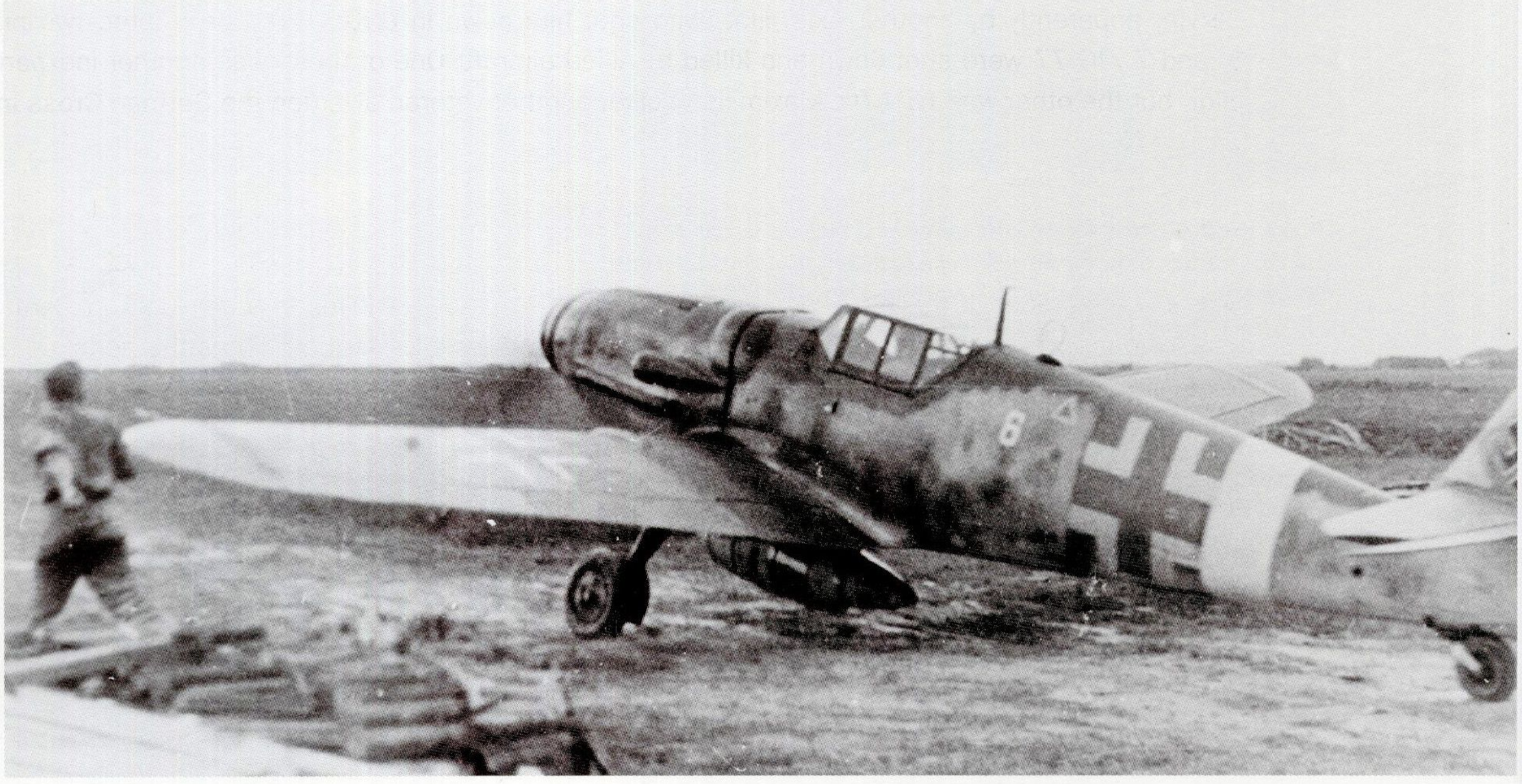




ABOVE AND RIGHT: This Bf 109, probably a G-8/R5, belonged to the reconnaissance unit 2./NAGr.11 and was photographed on 7 August 1944, shortly before taking off for the Gruppe's 4,000th mission.



RIGHT AND BELOW RIGHT: The same aircraft upon its return. Note the shortened radio mast behind the canopy and the loop antenna for the FuG 16 ZS direction finding radio. Also of interest is the fuselage Balkenkreuz which has had the black centre deleted and, in order to provide the required contrast for the white corner segments, appears against a solid, dark background panel, probably RLM 74. The crosses on the uppersurface of the wing are also in white outline style only. The pilot of this aircraft was the Staffelkapitän, Oblt. Karl-Otto Holzapfel and the photograph shows Holzapfel, centre right, with his usual Kaczmarek, Ofhr. Walter Graab, centre left, who accompanied Holzapfel on his flight. Holzapfel had a very interesting career. In 1939 he was an artillery officer in the Reserve but volunteered as an observer and joined 2.(H)/14, then equipped with Hs 126 aircraft. He then took part in the African campaign alongside the Afrika Korps, and when 2.(H)/14 returned to Germany at the end of 1942, he was transferred to 4.(H)/12. As that unit was converting to the Bf 109, Holzapfel trained as a pilot and at the end of 1943 returned to his unit, since redesignated 2./NAG 11 and then based in Italy. He succeeded Hptm. Fritz Galland – one of Adolph Galland's brothers – as Kapitän in about June 1944 and left the unit in January 1945 to train on the Me 262. Holzapfel survived the war but his old Kaczmarek, Graab, is reported to have been killed around 6 May 1945 while flying a Junkers W 34 out of the encircled city of Berlin. NAG 11 used small fuselage numbers and its Staffeln retained the colours used by the formation from which they had been formed. Thus, the tactical numbers of 1. Staffel, formed from 2. Aufklärungsgruppe (H) 14, were black, while 2. Staffel, formed from 4./Aufkl.Gr 12, used white.



The End in Italy

On 1 August, each *Gruppe* of JG 77 was ordered to raise an additional *Staffel*. In I. *Gruppe*, a new 4. *Staffel* was raised while the old 4. *Staffel* was redesignated 7. *Staffel* and added to II. *Gruppe*, which then formed a new 8. *Staffel* to make up the required four *Staffeln*. Similarly, in III./JG 77, which was operating in Rumania, 9. *Staffel* remained unchanged while the old 7. and 8. *Staffeln* became 10 and 11./JG 77 and a new 12. *Staffel* was raised.

In the first half of August II./JG 77, now the only German fighter unit present in Italy, saw little action, the main weight of the Allied air offensive now being borne by the Italian Bf 109 units.

At 08.00 hrs on 15 August, the US Seventh Army carried out Operation 'Dragoon', the Allied landings in the South of France which, planned under the code-name 'Anvil', were intended to free the port of Marseilles for supply purposes, pin down the German Nineteenth Army, and secure the southern flank of the invasion forces which had landed in Normandy during 'Overlord' on 6 June. To counter the large bomber forces, only JGr. 200 based at Aix was present in Provence, and II./JG 77 was hurriedly transferred to the area from Ghedi. The ground personnel were transported by German-operated SM. 82s of 6./TG 1 but, despite this effort, there are no claims or losses recorded during this period by II./JG 77 and it seems to have met with little success. Far more active was JGr. 200 which, before 'Dragoon', claimed five victories on the 12th and four more on the 14th. In any event, the pressure of the Allied air forces and their superiority over Southern France soon forced II./JG 77 to return to Italy, but as there were not enough transport aircraft, the pilots did what they always did in such circumstances and carried one or two members of the ground staff in the fuselages of their Bf 109s. Unfortunately, the Bf 109 G-6 flown by *Gefr*. Gerhard Ebert of 7./JG 77 was shot down near Levaldigi, killing the pilot and his passenger. *Ofw*. Erich Ett of the same *Staffel* had a little more luck. While ferrying two mechanics, a technical problem caused him to crash-land his "Gustav" in the Turin area, but he and his passengers escaped unhurt. Two other pilots of 5./JG 77, *Fw*. Paul Tanck and *Flg*. Karlfried Nehrenheim, crashed in Switzerland where they were interned for some months [8]

JGr. 200 also left Southern France at the same time as II./JG 77, and in September, one of its pilots, *Lt*. Kurt Bell, a former instructor with EJG *West*, was credited with two victories in the Besançon area of Eastern France, near the Swiss/German border, where the unit endeavoured to provide cover for German troops retreating from Southern France. JGr. 200 finally assembled at Stuttgart where it was disbanded and the pilots dispersed to various *Jagdgeschwader*, Bell, for example, joining JG 54 while *Ofw*. Eduard Isken, a holder of the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold* with some 40 victories and formerly with III./JG 77, joined JG 53.

Three days after the return of II./JG 77 to Northern Italy, Rumania changed its alliance and joined forces with the Soviets in fighting their former ally. The German retreat from Rumania was supported by II./JG 51 which hurriedly left the Balkans. Three days later, on the 24th, *Stab*/JG 77, was ordered to Hungary, where it was subordinated to *Luftflotte* 4 and reunited with III./JG 77, which had also withdrawn from Rumania.

On 2 September, *Gefr*. Hans-Günther Klose, an inexperienced pilot of 5./JG 77 was killed near Cervia, apparently by another Axis pilot, who shot him down in error. Three days later, two pilots of 6. and 7./JG 77 were shot down and killed by Allied aircraft. One of these was another inexperienced pilot, but the other was *Fhj.Uffz*. Maximilian Volke, another veteran awarded the German Cross in Gold, who had been credited with 37 victories.

II./JG 77, the last German fighter unit in Italy, was then ordered to move to Dresden and all elements had left the area by 14 September. The last casualty of the German *Tagjagd* in Italy was a driver, *Stabsgefreiter* Bruno Bauer, who was attached to the *Stabskompanie* of II./JG 77. He was probably a member of the *Nachkommando*, or rearguard, and was killed in an incident at Domegliara, near Verona, presumably when the last of the *Gruppe* withdrew to Germany. Thus the aerial defence of Northern Italy was left to the two Italian Bf 109 *Gruppi*, which continued to fight to the end.

Ironically, the only German Bf 109s to operate almost to the end of the war in Italy were the reconnaissance machines of NAG 11. The disbandment of Stab and 1./NAG 11 was announced on 8 April and on 27 or 28 April, the personnel of 2./NAG 11 are believed to have destroyed all their aircraft and withdrawn to Bolzano.

On the ground, the tenacity and skill of the German defence delayed the progress of the Allied advance, and in October a last attempt to break through before the onset of winter weather met with failure.

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[8] While in Switzerland, Nehrenheim met and became engaged to a secretary working in the German Embassy in Berne. Both pilots were exchanged in November 1944 and although Nehrenheim probably survived the war, his comrade was posted missing following Operation 'Bodenplatte' on 1 January 1945.

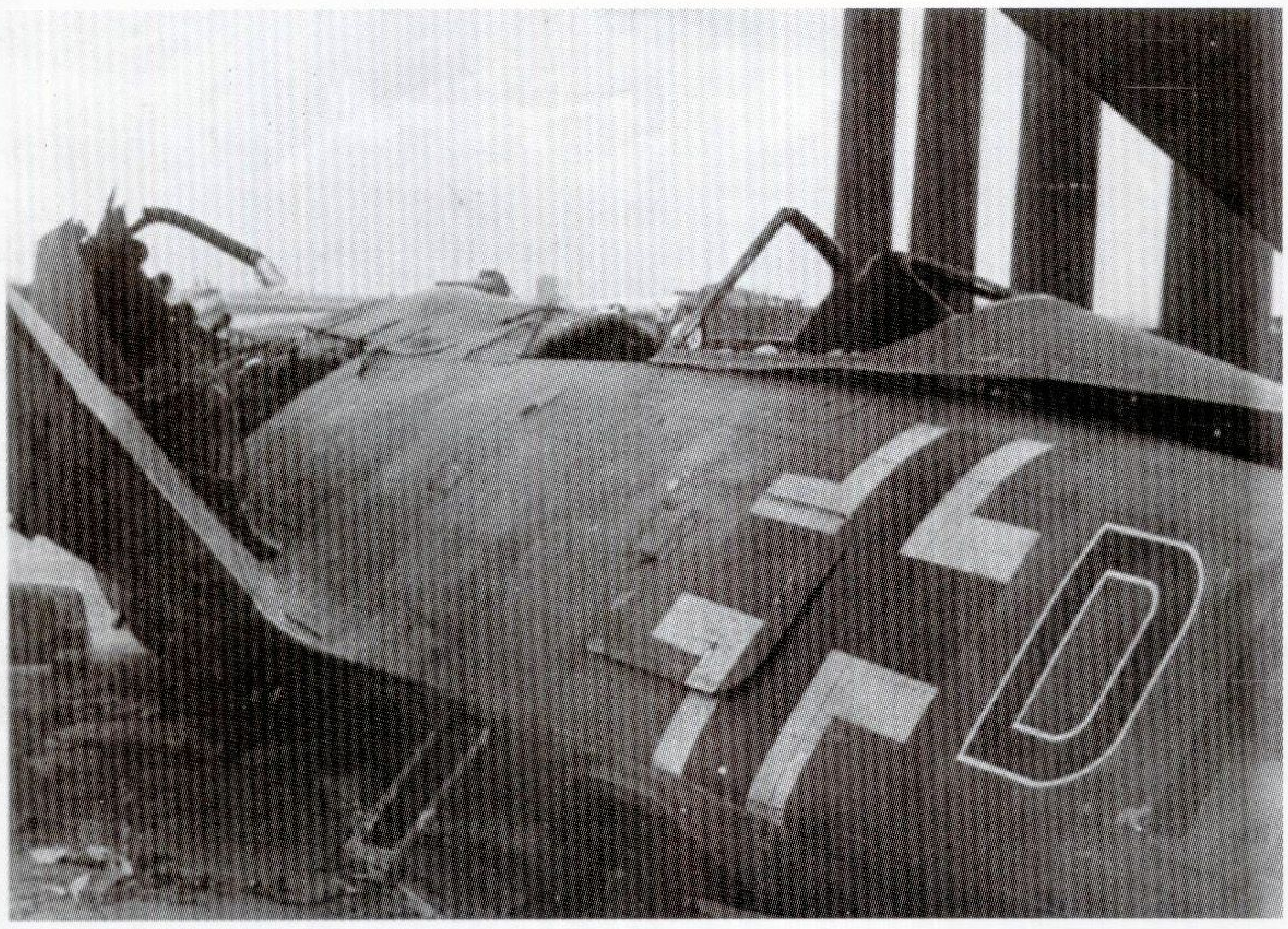
By the time a renewed offensive was attempted in April 1945, Kesselring had been transferred to become commander in chief of the Western Front and was replaced by *Generaloberst* Heinrich von Vietinghoff. The Allied plan called for a powerful double blow at the Axis defences beginning with the British Eighth Army on the right, followed a few days later by the US Fifth Army on the left. This staggering of the start times allowed the Allies to employ their overwhelming air superiority in support of both attacks.

The British assault began on 9 April accompanied by heavy artillery strikes and an attack by 1,233 bombers of Fifteenth Air Force which released nearly 25,000 bombs, saturating the German defences. These bombs were dropped within five miles of the Allied ground forces and planning was meticulous in order to alleviate any errors. A deadline was also arranged, after which the bombing ceased so that ground forces would not be endangered by advancing into the target area.

The US assault began on 14 April and was again supported by a heavy artillery bombardment as well as an air strike. Both forces achieved the desired breakthrough and although von Vietinghoff committed his last reserves in an attempt to hold the Fifth Army, he failed to do so and both British and US Armies continued their advance north and west, towards Austria and France. Finally, on 29 April 1945, *Generaloberst* von Vietinghoff agreed to the unconditional surrender of all German and Italian forces in Italy.

By the time the surrender became effective on 2 May, the defence of Italy had cost the Germans over half a million casualties and the Allies over 300,000 killed or wounded. From the Allied perspective, the Italian campaign, while costly, had tied down about 55 German divisions in the Mediterranean area, forces which might well have had a decisive influence had they been available for use in Russia, or in France following the Allied landings in Normandy in June 1944.

> ***"There was a great feeling of camaraderie between ourselves and those defeated German troops. Through the war, a lot of blokes had thought, 'Wait till I see the Huns; I'll bloody murder them'. But in the end it didn't work like that at all. They were just ordinary squaddies like us."***
>
> *Former British Army Corporal Ian Davis, commenting on the end of the war in Italy.*



LEFT: By July 1944, following the withdrawal of SG 4, the only tactical support which the Luftwaffe could provide for the ground forces was by NSG 9, a night ground-attack Gruppe equipped with Ju 87Ds. In January 1945, however, an attempt was made to modernise the Gruppe's equipment and 1./NSG 9 received its first Fw 190s, with which,in addition to their ground attack missions, the pilots flew some night fighter sorties. The stripped remains of this example, W.Nr. 581632, an Fw 190 F-8/R1 coded E8+DH, was photographed in a hangar at Villafranca di Verona aerodrome in May 1945. The full code was in black with the third letter,'D', thinly outlined in white.

BELOW: NSG 9 continued to operate in Italy until 27 April, five days before the cease-fire, after which some elements regrouped on the landing ground at Innsbruck-Hötting in Austria. This Ju 87 D-5 is believed to have been destroyed by demolition charges when the unit finally disbanded, although US veterans state that one of their soldiers set off a booby trap.

BELOW: Another more intact example of one of NSG 9's Ju 87 D-5s, also photographed at Innsbruck-Hötting, some months after the end of the war.